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‘There is Something Special about the Church’ – a Study of Wedding Couples in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark

Abstract

This article presents analytical findings of an explorative, qualitative study of the understanding of the wedding ritual among couples in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark, conducted in 2012. In a combination of ritual theories and theories from the sociology of religion, the analysis explores what kind of ritual understandings wedding couples express when talking about their wedding. Depending on the degree and way in which wedding couples express wishes to personalise ritual, two ideal types, *traditionalists* and *selective*, are constructed. By the end, I discuss similarities between personalisation of established rituals and self-constructed ritualisation. Furthermore, I point to a need for understanding the meaning established rituals as emerging in the meeting point between ritual order and participants.

Keywords: ritual practices, Christianity, qualitative methods, modern religion, wedding, Denmark

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1. Introduction

In modern European society, Christianity is primarily expressed through collective, ritualised practices: Sunday services, other services during the week and ceremonies connected to life-cycle events such as baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals. While attendance at Sunday services is low – in Denmark an estimated 2-4 per cent of Church members attend Sunday service regularly – life-cycle rituals are more popular (Davie 2000, 72-77); although increasingly they face decline, also in a Nordic context. According to Norwegian sociologist Inger Furseth:

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).

With such evident changes taking place, research tends to focus on this major shift; even though a considerable part of modern European Christianity is still expressed through participation in ritualised actions. This participation may appear stable on the surface, but a closer look might show that the perception of established ritual actions also transforms among people still participating in them. The issue of ritual participation has predominantly been examined either through sociological investigations of the prevalence of and reasons given for participation in church rituals, or through theological considerations of the theological meaning of life-cycle rituals as well as their impact on ecclesiology and the theology of ministry. Neither of these approaches focuses on the individual ritual participants and their stated reasons for engaging in church rituals. These approaches therefore do not enable an in-depth examination of the understanding of rituals that underlies

ongoing ritual practice. Nevertheless, exactly this kind of knowledge is of practical theological interest to understand contemporary religious practices – also those that remain within the church.

The present study serves as an explorative in-depth examination of the understanding of ritual actions among wedding couples in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD), with the expectation that ongoing ritual practice may include understandings of rituals influenced by modern religious understandings and practices. Through a combination of theories from the sociology of religion and ritual theories and qualitative semi-structured interviews with wedding couples, I examine the degree to which these wedding couples express understandings of ritual influenced by modern religious ideas and practices. The primary purpose of this article is to provide an in-depth analysis of the interviews, wherefore discussion of the theoretical and to some degree methodological considerations is kept at a minimum.¹

2. The Subjective Turn and its Impact on Modern Understandings of Religion

Though the 20th century is characterised by both social and individual secularisation, most scholars agree that the late '60s and early '70s mark a significant change, often referred to as the subjective turn (Taylor 1992; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). This implies that religion is influenced not only by secularisation, which results in a decrease in personal religiosity and the influence of religion in civil institutions such as law, health care and schools, but also by individualisation, carried by an ethic of authenticity (Taylor 1992). Religious belief is in decline; moreover, being religious no longer means adhering to specific religious traditions, dogmas and authorities; being religious is an individual enterprise based on personal considerations and choices. This tendency influences established religious institutions. In a British context famously coined by Grace Davie as 'Believing without Belonging' (Davie 1994) but in a Danish context often turned upside down as 'Belonging

¹ An in depth theoretical discussion may be found in [removed for review]

without Believing' (Riis 1994, 99). Thus, even though religious individuality is most vividly exposed in holistic spirituality, it also affects established religions.

Ritual practices within holistic spirituality seem to mirror tendencies that characterise changes within the understanding of religion. New rituals are characterised by creative adaptation. Ritual participants actively create ritual actions for a specific purpose, often combining different religious traditions. The goal is not to enact a specific, traditional ritual. Instead, the goal is to recreate specific, authentic feelings that the participants expect former participants of a similar ritual to have had. Anthropologist Michael Houseman describes this eloquently in a comparison of folkloristic and New Age first-blood rituals (Houseman 2007). In addition, sociologist Ida Maria Høeg makes a similar point in an examination of naming rituals in modern Norway (Høeg 2008). In her study of post-mortem rituals theologian Elaine Ramshaw follows the same line of thought as she points to the close connections between meaningful and personal in postmodern culture (Ramshaw 2010, 172). In this understanding, a meaningful ritual is recognised by the feelings that arise from it, not by the 'right' ritual actions. Such theories of new rituals as well as traditional and well-established theories of ritual share the basic tenet that a meaningful ritual conveys a change in life of the ritual participants, however, they also differ in fundamental ways. With the term 'traditional theories of ritual', I cluster together different theories of ritual – ritual as social coherence (Durkheim 1995 [1912]), as symbolic communication (Turner 2009, Leach 1976), as meaningless action (Bell 1992, Staal 1979), as a specific type of communication (Rappaport 1979; 1999) – which are usually represented with respect to their differences. Nevertheless, in relation to theories of new rituals, their similarities are dominant ([removed for review]). Across internal differences, traditional theories of ritual refer to rituals as part of traditional, well-established religion, which includes most of the surrounding society whereby rituals are directly connected to an established social group. Furthermore, this traditional type of ritual is typically conducted by

religious guilds that are taken to be authoritative. Within this understanding, rituals are often recognised by the ‘right’ ritual actions; they generally take place within an established religious institution; they have a relatively stable ritual form, are ascribed specific theological meaning and are conducted by religious specialists. Within the latter understanding, a ritual may be evaluated dependent on whether or not it is conducted according to tradition; within the former understanding, dependent on whether or not it is experienced as authentic. In both cases, the ritual experience as well as the social and individual acknowledgement of the changes that the ritual effects may be jeopardised: Is this couple truly married?

2.1 Modern Understandings of the Wedding

Since religious values characteristic of the subjective-turn influence mainstream religion as witnessed in value studies, it is reasonable to hypothesise that the characteristics of new rituals may also influence mainstream conceptions of ritual. Based on this general hypothesis, I studied conceptions of ritual actions among pastors and wedding couples planning wedding ceremonies in the ELCD.

Traditionally, life-cycle rituals have had only minor importance in theological research, to some extent even neglected. In recent years, however, life-cycle rituals have gained renewed scholarly interest. This renewed interest is visible in, for instance, the work of Ulrike Wagner-Rau (2000), Kristian Fechtner (2011) and Lutz Friedrichs (2008). The scholarly interest in life-cycle rituals takes into account the fact that churches are placed in modern, secularised societies populated by large numbers people who relate individually to religion according to their own decisions and considerations. In this sense, theological scholarship supports the present hypothesis that the conduct of life-cycle rituals is dependent upon changes in societal values. Recently, scholarly work on weddings has – especially within a protestant tradition – been dominated by

discussions of same-sex weddings in churches. These discussions clearly show the interdependence between life-cycle rituals and changes in societal values [removed for review]. This is also evident in studies of weddings which in different ways examine why religious wedding rituals still appear to be attractive and meaningful in an increasingly secularised world (Merzyn 2010; Fopp 2007; Robinson et al. 2007; Lämmlin 2004). Whereas a church wedding has basic ritual characteristics that makes it attractive, the interpretation of the meaning of these characteristics may change over time.

The present study supplements previous studies of the wedding ritual with a specific interest in the wedding couples' understanding of the wedding as a ritual event. Based on the general hypothesis that even though traditional understandings of ritual are dominant among ritual participants in established religious rituals, modern understandings of rituals can be expected to supplement this understanding, I investigate to what extent wedding couples in the diocese of Aarhus represent traditional and/or modern ideas of a meaningful wedding when discussing their own wedding ritual with their pastor. In Danish culture, a church wedding is still anticipated as the typical or traditional wedding ceremony. Consequently, the study of traditional church weddings provides a strong test or a least likely case for identifying modern understandings of rituals.

3. Research Design: Explorations into the Discourse about a Meaningful Wedding Ritual

The ELCD is a majority church (by January 1 2018, 75,3% of the population are members)². It is inscribed in the constitution paragraph 4: 'The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is *Folkekirken* (the people's church) and is supported as such by the state'. The majority of members are often described as 'cultural Christians' (Zuckerman 2008, Iversen 2005). In their behavioural pattern church attendance is low despite participation in life-cycle rituals and special church services such

² Statistics can be found at <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/folkekirkens-medlemstal/>

as Christmas Eve being common. The wedding ritual including mandatory readings from the bible is officially authorised by the Queen of Denmark. Songs are in general selected from the authorised hymnbook. The church wedding is legally binding.³

The study was conducted in selected churches in the diocese of Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark, from spring through autumn 2012. The study included monitoring and audio recording of thirteen conversations between pastors and wedding couples preparing the wedding ceremony, along with thirteen semi-structured interviews with the included wedding couples. The interviews with the wedding couples were conducted immediately after as well as in the same room as the monitored conversation between pastor and wedding couple, which made the conversation a common ground between interviewer and interviewee that could be referred to and elaborated upon. All ministers and wedding couples were introduced to the study as well as confirmed consent. The interviews followed an interview guide and lasted 30-45 minutes.

The sample consisted of thirteen wedding couples who were invited by their pastors.⁴ The pastors were asked to invite couples who were younger (born after 1970), who married for the first time,⁵ who lived in or came from the given parish, and who were not associated with specific Christian groups. Most of the wedding couples met all of these criteria; the remaining few met all but one of them. All couples were of Danish heritage apart from two brides (Swedish, Ukrainian). The goal was to include wedding couples who could be described as cultural Christians as well as belonged to the parish in order to distinguish between rural and urban areas. Their educational level

³ The special character of the ELCD has been covered in numerous publications. See for instance Bach-Nielsen 2012, Christoffersen 2010, Nielsen and Kühle 2011)

⁴ The selection of ministers was not based on theological positions. The influence of theological differences was sought to be minimized both through the choice of diocese – the diocese of Aarhus has a wide spread of theological positions – as well as through excluding ministers with very explicit theological positions.

⁵ To support coherence in the sample, younger couples marrying for the first time were preferred. The criterion of first marriage was included to enhance the possibility of wedding couples sharing expectations even in cases where the age criterion could not be met.

was recorded although not part of the selection process. The wedding couples are referred to by number. The wedding couples, their parish and educational level are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of wedding couples based on parish and education (N=13)

Parish Higher Ed.	Rural	Urban
Vocational/None	3	1
BA/MA	3 ¹	6
	6	7

¹ Only one couple (Couple 5) has a combination of a vocational education and MA. They are categorised as BA/MA because they both have the higher education in their respective categories.

After a full transcription, the interviews were coded⁶ by two types of deductive codes:

Traditional understandings of ritual and *Modern* understandings of ritual. Traditional understandings of ritual refer to the basic tenet that a meaningful ritual accords with time-honoured ritual form supplied by a traditional religious institution. Following, the subcodes of traditional understandings are described by concepts from traditional theories of religion (see Table 2). Modern understandings of ritual refer to the understanding that a meaningful ritual expresses individual hopes and ideas. Accordingly, subcodes of modern understandings are described by concepts from theories of the subjective-turn besides studies of new rituals (see Table 2). The initial deductive coding aimed at detecting traditional and modern understandings of ritual. In addition, the coding process revealed that expressions that referred to change as the basic characteristic of ritual were prevalent. Therefore, the initial coding was supplemented by the code: *Change*, capturing a strong expression of the church wedding as a real change that makes it more serious than other types of weddings. Though the code *Change* stems from an inductive inquiry and is explicated by inductively deduced subcodes, it refers to a fundamental characteristic within both modern and traditional theories of religion. Furthermore it has a specific theoretical foundation in ritual theories

⁶ After careful instruction, coding was done first by two independent coders (student assistants); subsequently by the author.

and studies that emphasise the efficacy of ritual actions (Sørensen 2005) that enables ritual actions to express magic changes (Wagner-Rau 2002; [removed for review]).

The final coding was done according to the coding scheme displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Coding scheme for analyses of interviews and conversations

Code	Subcode	Definition
Change		A church wedding sets a difference between before and after. Typically described as a solemn occasion, as something to be taken seriously or as an undefined experience of something special.
	Solemn	A church wedding is a feast and thereby a time set apart from ordinary times
	Serious	A church wedding is not a game but is to be conducted in earnest
	Special	A church wedding has a undefined but unique feeling to it
Traditional		A church wedding is part of a culturally well-established religious institution and is recognised by a stable ritual order and an established meaning. It is connected to other rituals in the church room and is conducted by a group of people in communion
	Ritual order	A church wedding includes a specific sequence of performances
	Established meaning	A church wedding is ascribed a specific content
	Tradition	A church wedding is a culturally well-established practice for entering into marriage
	Other rituals	A church wedding is connected to other ritual activities that takes place in the church room
	Community	A church wedding is conducted by a group of people gathered for the occasion
Modern		A church wedding is a personal ritual occasion that is chosen by the individual couple and should be adjusted according to their preferences. This may include inspiration from other religious and cultural traditions
	Personal meaning	A church wedding is ascribed a content in the individually specific occasion
	Action adjustment	The action sequence of a church wedding is adjusted according to personal preferences
	Personal decision	A church wedding is an individual choice that can be argued for
	Other traditions	A church wedding include inspirations from other religions and cultures

The final coding revealed minimal impact of the subcode *Other traditions* both in representation and meaning ascription. Therefore, this code is not included in the analysis.

4. A Personalised Traditional Wedding

The analyses explore the importance of the three main codes: the church wedding experienced as a change, as a traditional wedding and as a modern personalised wedding, both with respect to representation among wedding couples and with respect to the understandings of ritual expressed in the manifold discourse about what a successful wedding is. In this sense, the analyses are thick descriptions focused on capturing the divergent understandings of ritual that might lie behind seemingly similar expressions.

4.1 Church Wedding is experienced as a Change

All wedding couples agreed that a church wedding is a real change and refer to it as characterised by being solemn, serious and something special. Church wedding has a special feeling to it that is thought to emphasise that it is not a game: it is for real. These types of references are prevalent among all wedding couples and the different kinds of expressions are systematised in Table 3.

Table 3: Expressions of a church wedding as a real wedding

Subcode/code	A church wedding is a change (N=13)	
Solemn	‘There is something solemn about the church that suits a wedding because it is something special’ ¹ (Couple 9)	(8/13)
Serious	‘We think it is more serious. It is not just: okay, we are married’ (Couple 2)	(10/13)
Special	‘... there is just a special feeling [in the church room]. And that feeling you cannot create anywhere else’ (Couple 3)	(13/13)

¹ Citations are condensed quotes from interviews with the wedding couples

Although all subcodes are well represented among the wedding couples, the most pervasive attribute is *Special*: church wedding has something special to it.⁷ This refers both to a special feeling that is connected to the church building and cannot be created anywhere else, and to

⁷ The prevalence of the subcode *Special* may also point to the wedding couples’ difficulties in describing their understandings of religion and ritual. Their reference to something special thereby signifies their diffuse or immediate sense of something unusual taking place in the religious ritual which they have no wording for. This impediment of religious language is a characteristic of secularised society among other things due to lack of religious socialisation.

a special feeling of a deeper meaning to the church wedding: 'A civil wedding is just a piece of paper, whereas this [a church wedding] is more in the heart' (Couple 8). This deeper meaning is also reflected when the church wedding is attributed a higher degree of seriousness than a civil wedding. A church wedding is a real change that expresses more than 'Okay, we are married', which implies that a church wedding seems to be ascribed stronger obligations. This is explicitly stated by one couple: 'I know it is the same piece of paper, but it is not as binding in a civil wedding as it is if you do it in a church' (Couple 5).⁸ The church wedding is also often described as solemn. This term is used both as a diffuse way of referring to a special feeling connected to an unusual, memorable day, and as a specific reference to the higher degrees of formality that makes the ritualised wedding ceremony stand out as something special: 'It is more solemn ... there is a little more formality, in a good way' (Couple 1).

Taken together, these references to church wedding as solemn, serious and special show a widespread representation of church wedding as a real change, which is often described in contrast to a civil wedding: 'I do not think that the city hall is a true wedding. [A civil wedding] is just to be sure; it is the safe road' (Couple 4), or: 'For me, a real wedding is a church wedding. If I would stand in front of the mayor and just say yes, it would not leave the same mark, it would not have the same importance for me, in some way' (Couple 13).

With these descriptions, wedding couples capture characteristics that, according to traditional ritual theory, render religious rituals so special: Taking place in a special room, with special ritual actions, ceremonial readings and with a religious leader as the traditional religious agent, church weddings draw on a whole gamut of religious as well as ceremonial markers that point to the wedding ceremony as conducted not only by gathered human agents but also by God

⁸ Wagner-Rau reports the same kind of reflections (Wagner-Rau 2002).

(Sørensen 2005; [removed for review]).⁹ The strong prevalence of these characteristics in the interviews supports that this is indeed one of the main attractions when cultural Christians continue to choose a traditional church wedding.¹⁰

Despite the wedding couples' somewhat restricted religious vocabulary: 'special, solemn, more real, more binding', their theoretically unexpected emphasis on the religious character of a church wedding also points to a kind of ordinary¹¹ or lived wedding theology. A church wedding is expected to leave a special mark precisely because it takes place in a church setting and within a religious worldview that allows the human world to be touched and changed by something bigger, something that exceeds the human world: God. Thus, in their ordinary theology, the wedding couples express an expectation of experiencing divine intervention in their life. They express this as 'something special'. Theologically, one might describe it as the holy spirit.

4.2 A Church Wedding Because We Like the Traditional Way

All wedding couples describe church weddings in categories coded as expressions of traditional ritual. They refer to ritual order, to established meanings of the ritual, to its roots in tradition, to other church rituals and to a sense of communion in the ritual. Thus, as was theoretically expected, the primary way of thinking appears to be captured by concepts evoking a traditional, religious ritual.¹²

The distribution of references along with exemplary quotes are systematised in Table 4.

⁹ Theories of new rituals also describe rituals as change but their focus is primarily on the participants' articulation of this change (Houseman 2007)

¹⁰ Robinson et al. also finds that the wedding ritual affects participants across religious socialisation (Robinson et al. 2007)

¹¹ As described by Jeff Astley (2002)

¹² This resonates with Jarnkvist who also finds tradition to be of major importance in the choice of a church wedding (Jarnkvist 2011, 121-131)

Table 4: Expressions of the church wedding as an established, traditional ritual

Subcode/code	A wedding is a traditional ritual (N=13)	
Ritual order	'They do that well, and there is no need to change that'	(11/13) (Couple 1)
Established meaning	'That blessing, that the minister, that a god accepts that you are getting married'	(11/13) (Couple 3)
Tradition	'It is like, it has been done like this forever, and this is the way it is supposed to be done'	(12/13) (Couple 5)
Other rituals	'Well, you have experienced a lot of important things in church ... such as our daughter's baptism'	(12/13) (Couple 5)
Communion	'I am just looking forward to being in that room with all the people I care about'	(13/13) (Couple 9)

The most prevalent category is reference to communion with friends and family in the ritual. An important element is to share the day, the experience and the special feeling of a church wedding with friends and family. This is vividly expressed by a groom who tries to explain why he and his wife-to-be wanted to hide from their guests that they had already had a civil wedding, so that the church wedding was 'just' a blessing of their marriage: '...we think that there is a risk that people do not quite take it as the solemn ceremony that it is, and will not be touched by it' (Couple 2).

References to the established meaning as well as other rituals are also widespread. By making references to other church rituals or other types of church affiliation, the wedding couples ascribe importance to their stable connection to a specific church. Though this connection is primarily established through other life-cycle rituals, especially through baptism,¹³ it is also described as a connection to the local church as local. In both senses, church remains the place to go at special times in life, despite marginal connections to church in everyday life:

¹³ Eight couples refer to the baptism of their child in the same church.

‘When your children are baptised and you expect them to have their confirmation, then you use 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’ (Couple 1).

The established meaning is generally referred to as either ‘to say yes’ or ‘the blessing’.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, this shows that for wedding couples the ritual at the altar where they are literally transformed from singular individuals to married couple, both through their own ‘I do’ and through the blessing from God is important. This reinforces an understanding of church wedding as a real change. Through specific ritual acts accompanied by a special feeling of ‘something more’, the wedding ritual literally transforms the wedding couple into something different. This seems to be deeply rooted in weddings couples’ understanding of church wedding.

The last two categories, ritual order and tradition, are also well represented, however accentuated differently. Wedding couples generally express not only a trust in but also acceptance of established ritual orders. Nevertheless, whereas some couples ascribe no further meaning to it: ‘Well, I suppose that it is the package, I do not think about anything special’ (Couple 10); other couples support the established ritual order much more strongly as an order they like and approve of. This is illustrated with statements such as, ‘... you should not rewrite it or change anything because the church represents the traditional and so you cannot change it; then it would not be the same’ (Couple 5). Some couples actively approve of the ritual order: in addition to making them feel safe, it carries important meaning.

The same divide is found in different ways of referring to tradition. According to some couples, tradition is just tradition. It carries no inherent meaning. Indeed, it is simply the

¹⁴ One couple (Couple 7) refers to ‘two families becoming one’ and thereby is the only couple to refer to one of the obligatory readings from the Bible.

standard or proper way of doing things: ‘It is just very traditional’ (Couple 10). According to other couples, tradition is norm-laden wherefore it implies a way things are supposed to be done, as expressed in the citation in Table 4 (Couple 5).

Different accentuations with respect to ritual order and tradition do not change the general picture that traditional conceptions of ritual are widespread among wedding couples. However, the different emphases indicate that some couples may be loosening their bonds to tradition increasingly seeing it as a frame rather than as a norm.

4.3 *Modern Understandings of Ritual: A Traditional Wedding in Our Very Own Way*

With respect to modern understandings of ritual, especially references to personal meaning, adjustments to the ritual order and personal decision are widely represented among the interviewed wedding couples. The distribution of references along with exemplary quotes are systematised in Table 5.

Table 5: Representations of expressions of modern understandings of ritual

Subcode/code	A wedding is a modern ritual (N=13)	
Personal Meaning	‘They were not doing it for the right reasons, they were doing the full monty because it was tradition and I just thought it was wrong’ (Couple 13)	(10/13)
Action Adjustment	‘Organ and piano are different things ... but we like rythmic music so we chose the piano’ (Couple 6)	(9/13)
Personal decision	‘We know that a big part of the package, 80 per cent of the package was [already] there ... but we chose it’ (Couple 10)	(4/13)

Ten couples emphasise ascribing or expressing personal meaning in the wedding ritual. This is strongly accentuated by Couple 13 (see Table 5). They explicitly argue against entering into the wedding ritual just because it is tradition. People should do it for the right reasons whereby they implicitly refer to conscious personal reasons for doing it. Other couples express personal meaning

more quietly as an allowance for personal preferences within the ritual; for instance in choice of hymns: ‘...maybe there are certain feelings connected to some of the hymns and there are, of course, some things you like to bring forward and some things that you do not wish to bring forward’ (Couple 5). Only four couples focus on personal choice. This may be forcefully stated as a conscious, critical choice of the wedding ceremony as indicated in Table 5, while it also finds more subtle expressions as a personal choice of tradition: ‘This [a traditional wedding] was what we wanted. We chose what we wanted and not so much what other people thought’ (Couple 5). Nine couples adjust the ritual order or express more diffuse ideas of adjustments that are not acted upon. In general, there were very few adjustments to the ritual order.

Whereas wedding couples primarily represent traditional understandings of ritual additionally, they seem to integrate modern understandings of ritual either as way of arguing for their choice of a traditional wedding or more strongly as a wish to express their personal tastes and preferences. Reflecting on their friends’ wedding, one groom said:

... and then they went out to that song [a pop song]. It was just so much in their spirit, and I thought that it was right then that it became evident that it was precisely they who went out. It really shined through that it was in their spirit, it was what they wanted, and then I thought it would be a nice thing to do too. (Couple 6).

This wish to express a personal style is reflected in wishes to adjust ritual order, often by including other musical instruments or songs that are not found in the hymnbook; in addition to a strong focus on personal choice of ritual elements: ‘Just step by step in our own way, we didn’t buy the whole package from the beginning’ (Couple 13).

These wedding couples choose a traditional wedding with open eyes; furthermore, they seek to adjust it to express their personal preferences. The final ritual may look very traditional, however, it is important that they have chosen it: not just because it is tradition, but because it is tradition in their own way.

5. Traditionals and Selective

All wedding couples unite in expressions that uphold the church wedding as an efficacious ritual. It should be solemn, serious and with a special feeling to validate that when they say 'I do' at the altar and receive the blessing, they have truly undergone a significant change: they are now a married couple. Church wedding is primarily described in traditional ritual categories, supplemented by modern understandings of ritual that seem to exhibit slight divisions among them. Some wedding couples expressed modern ritual categories stronger emphasising modern preferences to express individual choices whereby they challenge the limits of the established ritual order.

Thus, the hypothesis that the understanding of established rituals is influenced by modern ritual values appears to hold true. Even so, the analysis also points to rather different ways of approaching the established ritual: Either as good and solid in itself, or as a frame to personalise and choose from.

In the analyses, four codes stand out as differently perceived and valued among the wedding couples. Subcodes *ritual order* and *tradition* are used with different connotations. Furthermore, wedding couples vary on *action adjustment*, especially with respect to music, and *personal choice*. Thus, these codes seem the most important to capture differences among wedding couples. Focusing on this, two distinct groups appear. One group might be named *Traditionalists*. To them traditional ritual order is of value in itself. It is the norm of how to conduct a wedding, thus, there is 'no need to change that' (Couple 1). Their choice is primarily coined as a choice of

tradition, they simply want tradition; and their wish to influence music primary regards a choice of hymns. Another group might be named *Selective*. They also value the liturgical order as a well-known procedure for weddings. Moreover, they combine this with a distinct wish to adjust, pick and choose from the ritual, coined by couple 11 when they say ‘we wish to leave our own fingerprints on it’. These fingerprints are often expressed in their wish for music and songs outside of the traditional hymnbook.

Even though Elaine Ramshaw has worked both in a different context – North American – and on a different ritual – burial, her insights on personalisation of rituals as important for the meaningfulness of ritual supports the analysis of the wedding ritual. According to Ramshaw:

Personalization of death rituals runs the gamut from including the deceased’s favorite hymn in a set traditional funeral rite to designing an entire event to reflect the personality of the deceased and the needs of these mourners (Ramshaw 2010, 175).

According to this study, wedding couples show a similar gamut. Among *Traditionalists*, personalisation of ritual unfold within tradition. To them tradition is from the outset meaningful and important as it is, therefore, their wishes to personalise can be met within the options given by ritual order, predominantly choice of hymns. However, among *Selective* personalisation of ritual necessitates challenging the traditional repertoire of the ritual. To them a choice of tradition, of ‘the full monty’, appears shallow if not done for the right reasons. Thus, tradition is not something that is meaningful in itself, it is made meaningful if chosen consciously for personal reason expressed in small additions and adjustments.

6. Conclusions

The religious landscape is changing; new religious ideas and values are increasingly widespread among populations of the North-western hemisphere. This is vividly illustrated in new rituals, conducted according to individual meaning construction and life stories; though in this study also members of traditional mainstream religious institutions express modern religious values.

Nevertheless, across different understandings of a meaningful wedding, wedding couples share a deep appreciation of a church wedding being different from and something more than a civil wedding. Thus, it is not despite its religious character, but rather because of its religious character that wedding couple still choose a church wedding. They wish for a chance to experience divine intervention in their lives in this moment of change.

Furthermore, the analyses show that cultural-Christian wedding couples hold modern ritual understandings, although they seem to integrate these new understandings to different degrees. According to the *Traditionalists*, a church wedding is the right wedding simply because it is tradition. They like to uphold tradition. The *Selective* integrate modern understandings of ritual into their perceptions of the wedding ritual. One groom illustrates this position when he states:

... it is important [for us] that it is in a church and therefore is personal in the sense that it is something we have chosen, and we have also chosen the hymns. A big part of it kind of follows the procedures and that is fixed beforehand, but it is we who 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 (Couple 10).

According to this explorative study, a separation between traditional rituals in established religious institutions and modern rituals outside of them cannot be maintained. The understanding of established religious rituals is changing from within as church members incorporate new understandings of ritual. Therefore, the understanding of rituals within scholarship as well as within religious institutions need to develop to account for this. It may be in terms of 'liquid ritualizing' as

suggested by Arfman (Arfmann 2014) that allows for ritual procedures to be as liquid as society or it may be inspired by communication theories that positively allows for meaning to arise in the meeting point between sender and receiver. This has already influenced recent homiletics (McClure 2001, Gaarden and Lorensen 2013). Ritual is a type of communication moreover, as other types of communication it is not owned by its sender. Even though religious institutions represent a well-established ritual form and ritual meaning, ritual communication is only fulfilled when it meets ritual participants and their understanding of it. This should be incorporated in a contemporary understanding of rituals. Incorporation of contemporary understandings of ritual may unfold in revising the ritual order as well as the ways in which ritual participants are invited to contribute to the ritual. In a Danish wedding context, it could be opening up the choice of songs or even the choice of biblical readings. That would allow the pastors to choose biblical readings for the specific wedding couple or even to invite the couple to engage in the choice of biblical readings. However, according to the citation above, it is not necessary important to choose between many different things but predominantly to experience the choice of ‘package’ as your own choice. Much more than a different way of composing rituals, this entails a different way of thinking and talking about established rituals that might be even more challenging. The theology and meaning of an established church wedding is not defined beforehand, it emerges in the meeting point between wedding ritual, pastor and wedding couple. Thus, their reasons for choosing the ‘package’ are not only a way of describing their route to the established wedding ritual, they are also signs of a – implicit – wedding theology, that the pastor must take seriously and seek to understand in order for the meaning of the wedding ritual to develop among them. Such an approach is a far more profound change in the understanding and practice of established wedding rituals. An approach that take fully into account that also established rituals are both traditional and modern.

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