

Paul Post

From Identity to Accent:

The Ritual Studies Perspective of Fields of the Sacred

Opening: Ritual Dynamics

Since the long decade of the 1960s we have seen in the Netherlands, as well as elsewhere in Europe, a remarkable dynamic that we refer to as the *paradox of the rite crisis*. This paradox has been repeatedly described, analyzed, and commented upon and still constitutes an important framework for my research into current ritual dynamics.¹

On the one hand, we are seeing ritual and religion disappearing and in a crisis. The most telling example of this is the constant demolition of church buildings. Church buildings are becoming superfluous. It is estimated that more 1200 church buildings will have to be closed down in the near future. Although the rate, which was calculated earlier at around 100 per year, seems to have diminished somewhat, it is still a deeply radical process.² A positive byproduct of this phenomenon, however, is that the diligent search for possibilities for a new use mobilizes local communities.

On the other hand, we can see ritual on the rise and flourishing. In the Netherlands all kinds of groups (usually immigrants) of Christians are searching for suitable places to meet. In Amsterdam, for example, African Christians hold services in garages. Another sign of flourishing is the remarkable vitality of devotional rituals like pilgrimages and processions. Lourdes remains unprecedentedly popular,³ and a very striking international example of the revival and flourishing of devotional ritual is, of course, the *Camino* to Santiago de Compostela. This ritual is a true success story. Each year, an increasing number of pilgrims receive their certificate in the offices of the cathedral in Santiago. If we look only at the pilgrims officially registered there, that number

¹ Paul Post, *Vorbij het kerkgebouw. De speelruimte van een ander sacraal domein*, Heeswijk 2010.

² Post, *Vorbij het kerkgebouw* (see note 1).

³ Charles Caspers – Paul Post (eds.), *Wonderlijke ontmoetingen. Lourdes als moderne bedevaartplaats* (Meander 11), Heeswijk 2008; Ineke Albers, *Heilige kracht wordt door beweging losgemaakt. Over pelgrimage, lopen en genezing* (proefschrift Tilburg; Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy 5), Groningen – Tilburg 2007; Paul Post – Jos Pieper – Marinus van Uden, *The modern pilgrim. Multidisciplinary explorations of Christian pilgrimage* (Liturgia condenda 8), Leuven 1998.

reached 145,877 in 2009, and it was thought that 2010, for Santiago a holy year, would see perhaps 300,000 (that expectation was not realized; the total number was 272,496).⁴ In 2011, 183,502 pilgrims were registered. There was an enormous number of unregistered walkers and cyclists in addition to the official church registration, who completed the journey either wholly or parts of it on their own. The official statistics list the “top 7” countries of origin of the pilgrims as: Spain, Germany, Italy, USA, Canada, Austria, and the Netherlands.

But there are other signals of remarkable current ritual dynamics and growth. Here I think especially of the domain of remembrance and commemoration. Since around 1990, one can see a strong rise in so-called fellow sufferer groups. Each disease or disaster has over time gained its own fellow sufferer organization that, in addition to developing various ways to promote the interests of the group’s members, also develops ritual repertoires. A very successful exponent of this is the annual Tree for Life Day at the end of November.⁵ This is a ritual for remembering loved ones who died of cancer by planting a tree in the Queen Wilhelmina Forest near Biddinghuizen. It has developed into an extremely appealing ritual. After a walk, one reaches a central area where a short gathering is held with music, poems, and a speech. Balloons are released and glass plates with the names of those who died that year are unveiled. The people then move in a procession to the open area where shovels are waiting so the trees can be planted. People plant one of the young, pre-ordered trees as a family or as a group of friends and often mark the tree by hanging a photo or a poem on it.

Movement and creativity apparently characterize the whole domain of remembrance and commemoration. The ritual of the dead in general, as well as the remembrance repertoires of the First and Second World Wars and of the Holocaust in particular, are very much alive. Rituals after disasters have been given their own place in recent decades with a relatively fixed repertoire of silent processions, condolences, websites, memorial services, and monuments.⁶

⁴ For the *Camino* in general, with data per country, see the informative site of the Nederlands Genootschap van Sint Jacob: www.santiago.nl (Dutch Society of St. James) with links to other European sites. For the numbers cited here, see www.archicompostela.org/peregrinos/estadisticas (accessed March 2012), where one can find data on previous years.

⁵ Cf. www.wilhelminabos.nl; Judith Tonnaer, *Bomen voor het leven. Een studie naar een collectief hedendaags herdenkingsritueel voor overleden kankerpatiënten* (Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy 11), Groningen – Tilburg 2010.

⁶ Paul Post – Albertina Nugteren – Hessel Zondag, *Rituelen na rampen. Verkenning van een opkomend repertoire* (Meander 3), Kampen 2002; Paul Post et al., *Disaster ritual: explorations of an emerging ritual repertoire* (Liturgia condenda 15), Leuven 2003.

Balance

The description of the paradox of the rite crisis can be elaborated in a number of ways; one can think of, for example, the network of hundreds of meditation centers as “centers of silence” that have been set up,⁷ of rituals performed at home or⁸ at school,⁹ etc. It is much more difficult to strike a balance and to diagnose what is now occurring with respect to trends – how we can read and interpret, not to mention appreciate, such dynamics. We often note that the previous dominant institutional-religious parameters are adhered to when making such a diagnosis, and the dynamics are described in relation to that. Believers are “non-practicing” or “churchless” or are “floating,”¹⁰ or compensate for earlier church involvement and fitting in via new ritual repertoires. The secularization thesis also continues to play a role in various forms and assessments.¹¹ I argue for an open, candid start with empirical description and analysis of the ritual dynamics themselves. Which repertoires are we seeing? Which are dominant? What are the trends and themes? Certain key elements can be seen in the study of ritual movements and repertoires. I will return to this point below but can already point here to the fact that a strong tendency toward what can be called “basic sacred” and a dominant place for healing can be indicated. A great many rituals ultimately have to do directly or indirectly fundamentally with the search for and finding salvation and healing, to put it in classical liturgical terms.

My own research, which is embedded in the broader framework of the Tilburg research group, “Religion and Ritual”, focuses on these trends and contexts.

⁷ Jorien Holsappel-Brons, *Ruimte voor Stilte. Stiltecentra in Nederland als speelveld van traditie en vernieuwing* (Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy 10), Groningen – Tilburg 2010.

⁸ Goedroen Juchtmans, *Rituelen thuis: van christelijk tot basaal sacraal. Een exploratieve studie naar huisrituelen in de Tilburgse nieuwbouwwijk De Reeshof* (Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy 8), Groningen – Tilburg 2008.

⁹ Kim de Wildt, *With all senses: something for body and mind. An empirical study of religious ritual in school* (Dissertation Technische Universität Dortmund), Dortmund 2012.

¹⁰ Joep de Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen. Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit*. Amsterdam 2011; Joep de Hart, *Maak het nieuw! Over religieuze ontwikkelingen en de positie van de kerken: een persoonlijke geschiedenis* (inaugural address Protestantse Theologische Universiteit), The Hague 2011.

¹¹ A recent overview from a theological perspective can be found in: Anton van Harskamp, *Van secularisering, seculariteit en sacralisering, en van wat de theologie te doen staat*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 50 (2010) 3, 304–321.

Ritual-Sacred Fields: Sacrality and Rituality

I connect the question of patterns and typing to the heuristic tool of ritual sacred fields. Through the aid of a number of subprojects, we are developing this tool in the “Religion and Ritual” research group in order to map actual processes of ritual dynamics. We presented this at a number of places, tested and test it in subprojects, and are also constantly adjusting it.¹²

Before presenting the fields themselves, I will first make some remarks about underlying central concepts about the sacred and ritual, and I will discuss them in close connection with each other.

First of all, I emphasize the deductive character of my approach to the sacred. A general indicative content of the concept *sacred/sacrality* follows the same lines as Mathew Evans’ matrix.¹³ In the context of an approach of the holy as “set apart” and on the basis of use trajectories (newspaper reports in particular), he develops a typology of appropriations and ascriptions of “sacred.” This entails a movement away from the primary approach via the concepts of religion and/or spirituality. I will start with what I call the “ritual-sacral” domain, a term that is intended to indicate that we approach the sacral domain primarily via ritual practices and repertoires. Ritual and sacrality go hand in hand.

Following Evans’ typology of “the sacred,” the ritual-sacred domain can be designated as a process of ritually setting apart, or in the words of Jonathan Smith, a mode of ritually paying attention, a process for marking interest.¹⁴ Evans’ typology can be plotted on a matrix of four fields or types: “personal sacred” and “civil sacred” (both types are closely connected with the “natural” dimension), and “religious sacred” and “spiritual sacred” (both involve the “supernatural”). The point for me is the broad range that can come into view via this matrix. There is religion as institutional, as a tradition-bound category (including: tradition, authorities, religious/ritual experts, collectivity, and church buildings, temples, etc.). That is what Evans calls “the religious sacred.” And

¹² Post, Voorbij het kerkgebouw (see note 1), Deel III en IV; Paul Post, Place of action: exploring the study of space, ritual and religion, in: Paul Post – Arie L. Molendijk (eds.), *Holy Ground. Re-inventing ritual space in modern Western culture* (Liturgia condenda 24), Leuven 2010, 17–54; Paul Post, Heilige velden. Panorama van ritueel-religieuze presenties in het publieke domein, in: *Tijdschrift voor Religie, Recht en Beleid* 1 (2010) 3, 70–91; Paul Post, Fields of the sacred. Reframing identities of sacred places, in: Paul Post – Arie L. Molendijk – Justin Kroesen (eds.), *Sacred places in modern Western culture*, Leuven 2011, 13–59.

¹³ Mathew Evans, The sacred: differentiating, clarifying and extending concepts, in: *Review of Religious Research* 45 (2003) 1, 32–47.

¹⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To take place; toward a theory in ritual*, Chicago 1987.

there is the category of broad sacrality, the domain of spirituality, the basic sacred (which includes: the individual, freedom, etc., plus a plurality of sacred zones and places). That is what Evans labels “the spiritual sacred.” The two separated at the beginning of the modernity project, but the sacred does not disappear when religion becomes de-institutionalized. Institutional/traditional religion, thus, cannot exist without sacrality and spirituality, but sacrality can exist without a tradition-bound religion.

Ritual-Sacral Fields Briefly Described

After this brief description of the sacred and ritual, we can now describe the fields themselves. In the heuristic tool of fields of the sacred, “field” does not directly possess a certain coherence through boundaries and demarcations in the sense in which we talk about the domestic domain, the public or semipublic domain, or the city. It has to do with zones where coherence and, therefore, identity or profile emerge in the interplay of ritual repertoires and situating, cultural practices and representations in the sense of ideas, ideals, dreams, and views. I have worked this out more closely with respect to theory in a number of publications.¹⁵ Individuals who function as coordinates here are Henri Lefebvre,¹⁶ Kim Knott,¹⁷ Michel Foucault,¹⁸ and Jonathan Z. Smith.¹⁹ I will leave it at this.

In addition to these fields or zones employed in the tool are still other dimensions, functions, or qualities within the fields (as layers of and within the fields). Also, the fields do not move in a vacuum but are embedded in a complex dynamic whole of cultural and social processes.

I will now define four fields or zones, each with more or less its own identity in ritual repertoire.

A. The Religious Field²⁰

In society and culture, religion is still present in institutional manifestations of church buildings, mosques, synagogues, temples, worship services, and ex-

¹⁵ See note 12.

¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space*, Oxford – Cambridge MA 1991 (orig. Fr. ed. 1974).

¹⁷ Kim Knott, *The location of religion. A spatial analysis*, London 2005.

¹⁸ Michael Bischoff (ed.; translation) – Daniel Defert (epilogue), Michel Foucault. *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper*, Frankfurt/M. 2005.

¹⁹ Smith, *To take place* (see note 14).

²⁰ Post, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw* (see note 1), Ch. 08.

perts in religious ritual but can also take on modern and postmodern forms, for example, in and through new media.

B. The Field of Marking and Remembering²¹

In a very general sense, this second field has to do with forms of ritual marking and pondering, such as rites of passage, our feast and festival culture, etc. But it has do in particular with divergent forms of dealing with the past, with the commemoration and remembrance culture that, as stated above, dominates our culture and is in full development. The repertoire is broad and flowing. Cemetery, museum, and memorials and commemorative spots, documentation centers, and libraries merge into one another.

C. The “Cultural” Field²²

The third or “cultural” field concerns the zone of “art and culture.” Here I place the visual arts, architecture, theater, film, art festivals, and stage, music events, concerts (classical and popular). Here I also place the great attention for museum culture, museums in all shapes and sizes. The fluid transfer to field B is immediately clear, as is its close connection to the following.

D. The Field of Leisure Culture²³

The umbrella term *leisure culture* covers the just as broad and diffuse field of our free time. This extends from our middle-class Sunday afternoon activities of taking nature walks to sports, vacation, travelling, festivals, and the varied world of parks and attractions. The subfields of sports and tourism leap out here.

Within these fields we can trace certain dimensions or ritual qualities. These can be basic aspects of rituality as mentioned by Grimes and Lukken following many authors in Ritual Studies (cf. “performed,” “social,” “collective,” “emotional,” etc.)²⁴, or it can have to do with the basic dimension that all fields also seem to share what Foucault refers to as “heterotopias” (Foucault,

²¹ Post, Voorbij het kerkgebouw (see note 1), Ch. 09.

²² Post, Voorbij het kerkgebouw (see note 1), Ch. 10.

²³ Post, Voorbij het kerkgebouw (see note 1), Ch. 11.

²⁴ Ronald Grimes, *Ritual criticism: case studies in its practice, essays in its theory*, Columbia 1990, 9–14; Gerard Lukken, *Rituelen in overvloed. Een kritische bezinning op de plaats en de gestalte van het christelijk ritueel in onze cultuur*, Baarn 1999, 47; Post – Nugteren – Zondag (eds.), *Rituelen* (see note 6) 39s.; Tollie Swinkels – Paul Post, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies according to Ronald Grimes*, in: *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* 19 (2003) 215–238, here 227.

Soja),²⁵ or it concerns dimensions that have to do not only with a shared basal layer but also bring a trend into view. An example of the latter is the dimension of healing we already mentioned above that is very much present in all fields.²⁶ Here as well, the now so sought after dimension of “doing” and producing or the heavy emphasis on the yearning for a current ritual to be connected to a place can be mentioned here as ritual attributes.

Moreover, and this is the last category that I will mention concerning the fields, the fields and their qualities or attributes are embedded in social and cultural processes. One can think here of globalization, economics and politics, de-institutionalization, individualization, etc.

Applications

These four fields and the dimensions connected with them offer a number of perspectives for the further study and analysis of current ritual dynamics. They primarily give a view of the dynamics of the sacred and sacred zones and help provide insight into processes of *transfer*: the sacred moves from one zone to the other in changed or unchanged form (for example, from the religious to the cultural field). They also help in acquiring a view of tensions in our culture, how they cohere with mutual relations between the fields. I am convinced that many tensions are rooted in relations between the sacred fields mentioned. The position of cathedrals in Europe is a good example of this. When a visitor after waiting in a long line in Paris finally reaches the entrance to Notre Dame, he or she is urged by a sign to choose: the right for a “visit” and the left for “Mass.” The tension between leisure and religion can be seen often – that is why the topos of the Tourist and the Pilgrim was classic for such a long time. But, alongside these discontinuities there is continuity, large areas of overlap that are manifested in, for example, those shared qualities of healing and heterotopia. With those fields I can also indicate the success and failure of ritual, a favorite theme in modern *ritual studies*. The enormous success of the *Camino* to Santiago seems to be explained by the fact that the ritual is connected with each of the fields, and that roots it deeply and widely in contemporary culture. In addition, institutional religion is becoming an increasingly smaller and more isolated field that is losing the connection to the other fields more and more. Modern missionary and inculturating religious movements, such as evangelical groups, are attempting precisely to find a connection again with the other fields, just as Huub Oosterhuis attempts to do

²⁵ Post, Voorbij het kerkgebouw (see note 1), Ch. 07.

²⁶ Post, Fields of the sacred (see note 12), Sub IVB.

with his “houses of inspired engagement” (Dutch: “Huizen van bezielde verband”) and the Nieuw Liefde in Amsterdam deliberately want to involve all fields in the project. Here we are beyond the church building: Nieuwe Liefde is “a center for study, contemplation and debate; a space for spirituality and religion; a podium for poetry, music and theatre”.²⁷

Flow: The A-Centric Perspective

With this comes an important current trend of rituality into view that I want, finally, to reflect on more extensively because it seems to be one of the most pregnant trends in modern ritual: the a-centric dynamic perspective that can be indicated and understood via the fields.

There is, as the *Camino* and the position of churches show, less and less of a sacrality that is linked to a primarily coherent dominant field. Sacrality is no longer connected exclusively to the religious field. In fact, the other fields are connected just as much to sacrality. And, there is not only a-centric in the sense of movements and alongside one another but also a far-reaching plurality and dynamic. The a-centric sacrality intended here can be understood against the background of what Manuel Castells called the *network society*.²⁸ Our society has been fundamentally changed by a series of major and connected processes like economic developments, globalization, migration currents, and digitalization. The network society is characterized by: a continually faster dynamic of change; a process of de-territorializing; virtualization; dematerialization of information, identities, and communities; horizontalization; and fragmentation. Classical distinctions are transcended, everything comes together in a “flow,” perspectives jump and change context. In that respect, our society has become “fluid.”

This important and fundamental perspective can be expressed via a reference to (socio- and psycho-)linguistics.²⁹ There, this perspective has been elaborated for some time already via the concepts of superdiversity and complexity. The insight there is that because of the flow mentioned we can no longer think in linear fashion via fixed schemas, paradigms, or structures in the culture but more in terms of the interaction of a plurality of cultural zones

²⁷ Cf. www.denieuweliefde.com.

²⁸ Manuel Castells, *The rise of the network society* (The information age: economy, society and culture 1), Malden 2000 (2nd ed.); Jan van Dijk, *The network society*, London et al. 2012 (3d ed.).

²⁹ Jan Blommaert, *Complexity, accent and conviviality: concluding remarks* (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies 26), Tilburg maart 2012, digitally accessible via <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/research/institutes-and-research-groups/babylon/tpcs/>.

or bundles. In the area of language, the attempt is made to do justice to the situation of diversity and polycentrism through the use of concepts like: dialect, code switching, bilingualism, multilingualism, etc. But perhaps we need to move to a more fundamental relativization in the sense of interacting linguistic and cultural zones, by which justice can be done to the diversity and complexity that we are finding in increasingly more places. Multilingualism, the mastery of several codes, registers, and speech styles is the norm. “Language” needs to be viewed as a complex dynamic system, as sets of variables. Rather than working with the concept “fluid(ism),” the sociolinguist Jan Blommaert opts for polycentrism and complexity, and especially for “superdiversity” to characterize the current situation in which “complexity is not the absence of order, it is the presence of a complex, non-categorical, non-equilibrium and nonlinear form of order.”³⁰

Identity, then, comes into view again because “accents” are introduced in that diversity and complexity.

It is interesting to see now precisely how – I will refer once again to the example of the *Camino* – modern pilgrims describe that flow and complexity and ambiguity. There is not just one profile or center. Identity is a question of accents in a complex and diverse whole. In the midst of the flow of long-distance walkers, the *Camino* travelers are distinguished by a shell fixed to their clothing or backpack.

Conclusion

We are, therefore, on the trail of an extremely important perspective for the empirical study of liturgy and ritual. Not only is every liturgical study inevitably a ritual study, it should also inevitably be understood in connection with the complex diversity of the network society culture. This brings completely new perspectives with it for empirical research, for the reassessment of concepts and theories, for policy and strategy. We are, furthermore, also beyond the dichotomy mentioned above of the Tourist and the Pilgrim. The pilgrim is also a tourist and the tourist also a pilgrim.

³⁰ Blommaert, Complexity (see note 29) 8.

Prof. dr. Paul Post
Vice-dean of Research | Director Graduate School for Humanities |
Director Institute for Liturgical and Ritual Studies
Tilburg University
School of Humanities
Department Culture Studies
Chair: Ritual & Liturgical Studies
PO Box 90153
NL-5000 LE Tilburg
Fon: +31 (0)13-46662586
eMail: p.g.j.post(at)uvt(dot)nl