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Rituals' Narrative Logics

Abstract

This article focuses on a double identity of rituals: the origin and main structure of rituals is narrative, and they represent a particular logic which aims at establishing a different quality of life. The narrative structure coincides with a typical characteristic of the human mind: the commemoration of striking dramatic or liberating events. Hence the ongoing concern to remember; the anamnesis intends to prevent that what among people never should be forgotten remains present in the individual and collective memory. Rituals are the most powerful means to keep memory alive. The coincidence of the faithfulness to a living tradition and the authentic commitment to present human concerns guarantees that the ritual anamnesis introduces qualitative change among the people involved.

Keywords

Anamnesis, commemoration, ritual, commemoration rituals, anamnestic solidarity.

Introduction

This contribution intends to combine the theme: “the rituals of the human person” with the idea: “structures of rituals: life and creativity”¹. In this text the concept of anamnesis, understood as “recollection” or “the process of remembering”, occupies a central place. I certainly have not forgotten that anamnesis also refers to the prayer after the consecration in which one is reminded of the suffering,

¹ This article is a slightly changed version of the H. Lombaerts, *Rituals' Narrative Logics*, in: P. De Mey, J. Haers, J. Lamberts (eds.), *The Mission to Proclaim and to Celebrate Christian Existence*, Leuven 2005, Peeters, p. 307-319.

resurrection, and ascension of Christ. I will pay particular attention, however to the rites in which the activity of “remembering” is put at the foreground as a far-reaching and change-provoking event. Moreover, “to remember” is deeply connected with stories. It is a rite meant to recall, together with other people, reminiscences, and the stories that are connected with them. Rites and stories are intertwined.

The title of this presentation contains the term “logic” and refers in other words to the correct reasoning or the logic of events. It seems that there is a certain order in experiencing rites. What is this order? The central question of my exposition is therefore the following:

Which narrative logics are appropriate for rites that have been built on what must not be forgotten?

Undoubtedly the question can be answered in a variety of ways. I want to point your attention to the importance of this question and to the far-reaching consequences of answering the question in whatever way. I will plead for a certain answer. This is an option, which is open for discussion and confrontation. I will develop my contribution in four steps:

1. anamnesis as a characteristic of the human mind;
2. the social dimension of anamnesis and its consequence for rites;
3. the ritual anamnesis as a call for change: when does anamnesis make a difference and about which difference are we speaking then?
4. anamnestic solidarity.

1. Anamnesis as a Characteristic of the Human Mind

To think is to remember. “To remember” or “to recollect” is an essential characteristic of thinking, and is thus constitutive for meaning, for the orientation of one’s life. Unfortunately, a large number of cases of deeply human stories have been banned from rational thinking and from society. Dogmatic systems to manoeuvre the past to streamlined abstractions and universal patterns of action. Some people situate Christianity outside of time and concrete history. Historicism disconnects a universal pattern from the actual events of the human reality.

By way of contrast, another opinion holds that the thinking person irresistibly “remembers”; thinking functions as memory. The human mind understands by recalling what happened to him or her. Human beings rely upon an emotionally felt memory, upon what touched them in a deep and lasting way, upon what

oriented their human existence and their identity. To understand and to think, just as rational thinking, has an anamnestic structure.

By joining narrative, rites, and logics it becomes immediately clear that our theme has to do with a paradox: on the one hand, the impact of the uncontrollable and unforeseeable events of life; on the other hand, either the impossibility of dealing with them in an adequate way or completely banning them from life. Can ritual and rational processes transcend them, so that humanity can benefit from this?

Allow me to give two examples to illustrate that the remembering mind is selective and can go many ways. The different stories of one and the same occurrence represent a different reality. During the last months we were overwhelmed by images of tragedies affecting large populations: typhoons, forest fires, earthquakes, and mining disasters. This happened among other places, in China and Japan. We know the rescue rituals, which try to deal with such events: local initiatives to offer immediate relief, more substantial help comes from international organisations. With united efforts these persons are helped to overcome destruction. Still, year after year, the powers of nature impose themselves. The event repeats itself, and it becomes a never-ending story. However, tropical storms are not as tragic everywhere.

Sometimes by paying close attention, one observes special rites that don't contribute to the immediate alleviation of needs. Certain disasters, like the one in Haiti, lead to public protest. Charges are raised against the political powers. The link is shown between the geo-political history of certain countries and natural disasters that are no longer as natural as is usually assumed. Haiti, certain areas in the Philippines, or Bangladesh are afflicted by typhoons in another way than Japan or Florida, even if it is a tragedy in all cases. But, this is another story... We see immediately that it is decisive for the fate of humanity, which story is told and which story remains untold.

A second example puts us in a different perspective. In Paris the district *La Défense* is well known as the impressive business centre with its high towers of glass and hectic life. It is situated in one of the historical axes of the city. Millions of people pass there every day. In its heart, justly above the crowded highway, *la périphérique*, '*La Maison d'Eglise*' was built. An ecclesial presence has been planted in the heart of the dynamic business life, with a meeting room, a café, conference rooms, and a church, which is not a parish church. In order to explain what this project of "*La maison d'Eglise*" in the district "*La Défense*" is all about, one has to narrate the story about the district, the negotiations between society and Church, the answer of the Church etc. The goal behind this initiative sounds

like this: in the midst of secular business life religion must be present, in an ecumenical spirit, and continue its evangelisation in memory of the living Jesus.

What exactly happens in this centre, what kind of initiatives are taken, who attends the meetings, what kind of rites are lived in this place... is another story to which I shall come back later. Now, I will focus on the narrative character of rites that recall the tragic and uncontrollable dimension of life, in which a person reaches the point of asking: how do I get through this?

In the first example (that of the anamnestic understanding and thinking) the stories and rites are connected with tragic events - moving events which give the normal passage of life an unexpected, usually deplorable, but in any case irrevocable turn.

These events reflect what is uncontrollable and contradictory in life. At the same time, they bear the call to resist destruction, to purify the human person from that which (s)he does not deserve, from what is strange to him or her. People who have been marked by their fate expect that rites can re-enact the most intimate processes of life, and that a new orientation of life can come about.

In order to achieve the changes that are desired, on the one hand a certain order and logic including particular norms have to be followed. On the other hand, accidental factors, new experiences, new situations, new interpretations of events, narratives, and rites also play a certain role. The question is: who determines the conditions that induce the change that is hoped for? What rules the ritual programme? Does the formal and standardized order and logic rule, or do the contributors provide something from themselves? Why do powerful anamnestic rites, like the Christian liturgy, suffer from a loss of their functionality in Western Europe, or why are they experienced as uninspiring and outdated?

I want to illustrate this by referring to sociological observations of the religious practice. According to the results of the European Value Studies, on the European continent, a substantial number of faithful actually interrupt the religious practice. They don't participate in religious rites, or attend only occasionally. In the European countries, most people do not replace this practice by alternative religious rites. Secular forms of society and culture seem to offer them a wide variety of possibilities to live a meaningful life and to guide the story of their lives.

In other continents one also observes a decline of the practice among traditional religions, but these 'lapsed' or unfaithful members of a church are attracted by an alternative religious rite: e.g. the Pentecostals in Latin America or the diverse movements and sects in a number of African countries. In North America, nearly all of the citizens are religious. Believers seek the ritual life, which best meets

their experiences, needs, or sensitivities. There are numerous alternative rites besides the main traditional religions.

What is the narrative logic behind the ritual behaviour of Europeans, North-Americans, South-Americans, Africans, and other cultures? I presume that “to remember”, anamnesis, and rites have much in common, but the way this relationship is observed by believers is situated outside formal celebrations. Anyway, this is certainly not the first time in the history of the liturgy that this problem occurred.

The observed changes in ritual behaviour of believers (stopping practice, in a particular place or continuing practice elsewhere), urge one to raise questions about the internal logic of the anamnestic attitude of religious persons. What do people want to remember and what do they not want to (be) remember(ed off)?

I don't make the suggestion that persons who are not practising, refuse to remember or to restructure their religious memories. It is rather my presumption that, in the context of each continent, people act out of a certain narrative logic. People have to tell their own story about their involvement in religion, both individually and communally. What is at stake here is the story of the “perception” and “reception” of what they want to maintain as religions or worldviews, and what they are willing to relinquish. There are many misconceptions on the anamnesis, which is typical for the Christian faith. The proper “order” of understanding and thinking orientates the vital aspects of life and shows how people are able to reconcile the different aspects of their life with one another.

In this respect, I raise the hypothetical question whether the decline of religious praxis in Western Europe is not explicable in the light of a twofold interpretation. A usual explanation relates the decline in Church practice with “unbelief”, religious “indifference”, with the upheaval of society because of hedonism, consumerism, materialism, and atheism.

According to another line of thought, the human person especially appreciates what makes, existentially and qualitatively, a “difference”. What doesn't make up a difference is rejected as being unimportant. People are looking for what makes a deep impression, improves their life, and gives it a new fervour, intensity, or content. This seems to be a very sensitive issue in our consumer and media-centred society. “Standardized” ritual moments would not possess this fervour and do not offer a qualitative difference. They would rather cause a dissonance with the logic and order of our daily experiences in contemporary society.

In Western Europe, the institutionalised religions do not offer many alternatives. As if the Christian anamnesis exerts only an integrating and deepening influence on the little community, which gathers to celebrate it.

Vatican II brought about an existential turn by focusing on the historically and theological consistency of what Christians intend to remember. In many places a significant change and greater involvement was reached. After the council, the radicalisation of this turn never happened or was stopped for ecclesiastical and disciplinary reasons. One can wonder whether a strictly ecclesiastical and institutional discipline itself has a paralysing impact upon the believers, apart from the external influences from the society and lifestyle. Does the ecclesial community possess the specific logic of an anamnestic human spirit?

2. The Social Dimension of Anamnesis and its Consequences for Rites

In Western Europe, but also elsewhere in the world, remembrance services of events has increased. The media pays attention to the evocation of important historical events. People erect memorial signs, and special museums are built on particular places to commemorate historical events. The rite of commemoration can only emphasise certain aspects of a particular situation. As a consequence, the rite filters and reorganises the stories of the past and its people. What happened in the past is unreachable. Memorial signs, rites, and stories are contemporary reconstructions.

By way of example, I want to recall the recent remembrances of wars and violence and the attempts for reconciliation linked to it. They obviously require a pious ritual design:

- nearly a century ago, the First World War started;
- more than 65 years ago, the Second World War finished;
- remembrances of the Jewish holocaust through the restoration of sites where numerous Jews suffered and/or died;
- remembrances of the fall of the Berlin Wall; celebrations highlighting the reunion of Germany, the independence of many a country in Central and Eastern Europe;
- there are constantly remembrance services concerning the wars between Japan and France, or between the USA and North (communistic) Vietnam, or Korea, etc;
- remembrance of 9/11 and the rebuilding of the site;
- the rites of diplomatic commuting to find a solution and to stop the use of violence and abuses;
- reports about the anamnestic rites to surpass the irreconcilable in South-Africa after the apartheid regime, or after the genocide in Rwanda, Burundi, or

Congo, the efforts and strict rules and rituals to be followed to condemn and punish people responsible for acts against humanity.

But also:

- ritual gatherings after the dead of well known public personalities (music, film, art) e.g. the case with the spectacular rite in a Dutch sports stadium, round the body of the singer André Hazes;
- rites of solidarity and compassion with the inhuman suffering after terrorist attacks or disasters;
- protest against violence and horrible situations of injustice.

And also special, ritually orchestrated attention to:

- monuments, historical sites and the stories connected to them;
- the age-old art of all genres of all times are scientifically corroborated to fully reconstruct and revive the original situation;
- archaeology, just to make sure the possible unlocking of the enigmatic past and to create an accurate picture of that past.

And...

- several of these commemorations integrate a Christian or a religious connotation, even though this dimension is represented often in cultural, historical, or esthetical perspective;
- the explicit religious commemorations are integrated in an explicit liturgical celebration that gives the anamnesis for the believers its proper dimension;
- the ritual of the papal visits, surrounding the declarations or appearances of the pope - their impact reaches much further than the private circle of Catholic believers.

A lot of these commemorations have a quasi-religious character. The civilians are mobilized and also mobilize themselves to be part of it. Some moments have a far-reaching influence on the memory and support the emotional thinking about human tragedies and situations. Often, an original ad hoc produced rite supports the event. It offers open opportunities that compose not only the historical memory, but also form an image of today's society and relation between the people, the development of a personal identity and life-project.

Yet, I want to point out a b-mol for a minute, and caution against a too linear approach to our theme. Let us take the history of Europe. During several centuries Europe was or thought itself to be the centre of the world: the reference par excellence for culture, for mercantile and military hegemony, for colonisation, for evangelisation and missionary work...

All these aspects, with a lot of heroes, deserve to be commemorated in a suitable manner. But one must not forget that the glorious past of this same Europe also

has a downside. The European system was also responsible for the exploitation of nations, for being patronizing towards other cultures and religions, for the (ab-) use of natural sources for its own enrichment.

Even though Europeans brought wealth to their continent with the help of their clever development, their manpower, diligence and religious-ethical convictions, the question still stands as to why this wealth should not lead to wealth for other nations too, or at least to a drastic decrease of poverty and repression in the world. Europe prides itself of the magnanimity and helpfulness of its people in case of international disasters or international human tragedies. The proportions of force remain yet unchanged. At a first glance the rendered help does not harm Europe.

In the constitution of the ritual anamnesis, it would be best to tell non-European stories as well, acknowledging the stories from the point of view of a particular country in the third world. Those people give another structure to their individual and collective memory concerning the tragedy of their history, often with enduring effects.

Or, to come back to the “*Maison de l’Eglise*” of *La Défense* in Paris: what happens when people from the world of business meet each other in the centre? Do they retire on an island that escapes even the vibrations of the killing traffic coming from the surrounding area? The peace and quietness stand in contrast to the busyness “out there”. What kind of ecumenical rites are devised to relate the Christian anamnesis to the longing, the ethos, the unforeseeable effects of the glittering activity of the industrial world? Or, are they just left for what they are, once one withdraws from it on the island of the “*Maison d’Eglise*”?

In line with this, I would like to pose another question: it seems as if the civil society appropriated the initiative to organise a ‘commemoration’, a ‘remembrance’. Often, these are mass events in which thousands of people participate. They are stimulated or even created by the mass media. These far-reaching moments enclose important aspects of the human life and society as a whole. As such, for the general public, the public space is the eminent place to give contents to the ritual anamnesis.

This orientation has manifested itself since the French Revolution. Until that time Christianity had monopolized the shaping the ritual anamnesis within the framework of the Christian redemption narrative. Today, however, the churches have a rather discrete position in the Western-European societies. It is true that the impressive architecture of the Roman, Gothic, Baroque and Modern church buildings have been restored in their original glory, and still attract many visitors. As such they play a significant role in the continuing a kind of Christian frame of

reference among the general public. When the service begins, it is presupposed that only believers are involved.

On the other hand, what is the possible relation between commemoration services in the public space, and the celebration of anamnesis inside the church building? Is it sufficient to state that it implies indeed two different contents of anamnesis? Is it sufficient that the events of the public sphere are just mentioned in the 'intercessions, the prayer of the faithful' during the liturgical celebration? Or is it possible to work in the direction of a rapprochement, in order to give a clearer profile to the Christian anamnesis in the socio-cultural context, and to link what matters for people in their daily life with the Christian anamnesis?

This is a major challenge for the churches in the next decennia: where, in what kinds of commitment, and in which rites will the churches make their social and substantial relevance present in the open society?

A lot of Christians in Western Europe think that liturgical services do not make a qualitative difference. However, they participate in 'quasi religious' celebrations or events in the public sphere, or search on their own for 'ritualised' 'meaning giving' moments within the religious tradition. Is it possible to bring together the involvement in both dimensions?

This reminds me of one Sunday, almost thirty years ago. In that period there was an explicit tendency to integrate the existential dimension of life and society within Eucharistic services, organised by young and less young people. That Sunday, we were reminded at the beginning of the service that a hunger strike was going on in the city in order to raise political attention for the repression in different countries of Latin America. In response to this situation, the 'community' divided itself in two groups. The first group went for a few hours to the hunger strikers to listen to people and to share their experience. The other group stayed where they were and read through the whole story of the Passion, meditating over it using information on the situation in Latin America. Later that afternoon both groups joined each other again. They exchanged their experiences, and progressively grew towards the 'Eucharist'. This means, towards the anamnesis as it is worked out within a Christian perspective, integrating those who are crucified today.

3. A Ritual Anamnesis Tries to Effect a Change

It is very instructive to look back to the evolution of anamnestic rites during the past centuries. In the Middle Ages, the Christian drama was the outstanding model by which life was given content, value and an ultimate destination. The

liturgical catharsis was a social event and had a great impact. The devotional and sacramental belief counted as a protected way to finally conquer evil, sin as well as the threat of eternal damnation and to safeguard a future of salvation. The Christian churches tried to maintain this model of unity: religion within society, Christianity as the sanctification of whole life, of the whole society.

Since the French Revolution, the secular, lay state developed itself juxtaposed to this Christian world or even in conflict with it. It produced proper anamnestic rites with an exclusive claim with regard to the control over the pluralized public space.

Today - by way of cautious conclusion - confusion seems to prevail. There seems to take place a quick and even accelerated "turn" in the way in which people today think about different religions. The religion and its liturgy are forced back into the private sphere, while its social relevance is being neglected. The Christian discourse - if it is heard at all - is listened to secretly, rather quick and rapidly crippled... as if an explicit reference to religion has to be considered as a sign of low degree of development, lack of freedom, lack of character and identity...

The social, philosophical-cultural and artistic order seems to take over the place of religious traditions in order to interpret all aspects of life. Culture is open to diversity and plurality: everybody can find something to suit him or her without being limited by normative doctrine or institutional discipline.

Today's self-image suggests that the well-educated person (after at least twelve years of schooling) is well prepared to live autonomously, to look for information independently, to come to insight, to take and to carry out decisions. In an open media-oriented society, much can be learned. Within this atmosphere, people are thought to go about religion in a pragmatic way. People are looking to what really makes a difference, what really produces something, what allows to survive, what gives free entrance to all modern society has to offer. People autonomously choose what makes their life better or more enjoyable. They independently look for the means offering the comfort of life they want for themselves. An open society develops processes that stimulate the involvement and the mutual communication of people - of faithful - bringing the concrete life within the ritual space of encounter and consultation, introducing a large variety of discourses and lifestyles.

Such an evolution evokes consternation and indignation among some people who believe that adaptation to the modern world would foster superficiality; and that it would mean surrender to secularism and the 'modern' world. Some fear that it would distract us from the sacred, from the Christian mystery; that the

world would become non-religious, contrary to the Christian rite and its effects of salvation.

Nowadays, (believing) people reach other insights; discover a different logic or another order to direct their lives. For this, they construct their own narratives and select places, moments, relations, objects, and rituals that perpetuate the contact with “strongly interfering” experiences. The media often focus on the biographical aspects of life; they offer models to build a personal ritual anamnesis. The “turning points” in life, with the related rituals of transition (*rites de passage*), remain an important given. And believing people still want to express the sacral dimension of those moments in a worthy way, a way that leaves a “sign” in their personal life.

Which possibilities do Christian churches have to connect the two kinds of logic (sensitivities, ways of reasoning, order of things)? Do they orient the faithful fundamentally towards a qualitative difference? When do the churches let stand out well the unique meaning of Christian anamnesis?

A separation has come into being between, on the one hand, the strongly subjectively coloured commitment towards values and giving of meaning, towards the divine, belief, prayer, devotion and rituals and, on the other hand, the institutional-disciplinary order that is inherently connected with the Christian confession.

The thesis of the British sociologist Grace Davie sums it up well: in certain countries the religious structure of ‘believing without belonging’ can be found; while in other countries there is much more a ‘belonging without believing’. In the first case, a lot of people do not give up faith in God and keep some kind of belief practice; but they estrange from its institutional organization. The second attitude suggests how others remain connected with a church and participate in the traditional rituals, but they estrange from the confession to which those rituals are connected. In this way, fundamental misunderstandings come into being between what the faithful begin to see and their independent search for, on the one hand, meaning within the concreteness of life, and on the other hand, ecclesiastical discipline and asceticism.

The question becomes, which “mediation” can contribute to a connection of the concrete, contemporary experience, and the openness towards giving meaning and the promise of salvation to the ‘logic’ and ‘order’ characteristic for the tradition of the Christian churches?

4. Anamnetic solidarity

There is one aspect that often pushes itself forward when remembering moments from the past, namely the reference to innocent victims. It is something with which people can easily identify. It can happen to people who are not involved in events, but who nevertheless are the victims of them. It can happen to anybody, and it is dramatic. In one way or other, to a smaller or greater degree, every human being experiences this.

In Western Europe, at the end of the eighties, the expression ‘anamnetic solidarity’ was strongly given content by the German theologian Johann B. Metz. Of course, the thematic itself already is present in his *‘Theologie der Welt’* and in the development of his ‘political theology’. The fundamental idea also is present in the anthropologically and existentially oriented theology of K. Rahner, in existential philosophy, which concentrates on the ‘destiny’ of the concrete human being.

In the second part of the twentieth century, the ‘forgotten’ history, the ‘forgotten’ humanity, the ‘forgotten’ vital needs and aspirations of the many people gave offence to a number of Christians in Latin America, in Europe and their view spread further to other continents, Africa and Asia.

The dialogue with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, concerning both the concept of communicative action and the importance of improved rational argumentation, have led Metz to explore an ‘anamnetic reason’ or ‘anamnetic understanding’.

As already mentioned, thinking is always recollecting; thinking is a form of memory, and it wants to be connected to time and history. Thinking requires an emphatic imprint of certain things upon our memory. Comprehensions, insights, rationality... all require an anamnetic structure that needs to be taken up into the concept of communicative argumentation.

The danger of universality and of certain dogmatic strands in Christianity is that Christianity forgets its connection with time and history; and comes to be identified with an a-historical substrate that imposes itself on factual life, and does not reckon with the latter.

Anamnetic understanding, however, is inevitably bound up with the concrete stories of individuals – both persons from the past and living persons. It feeds of recollecting the stories both of individuals and of nations, and is well aware that these stories continue to leave their mark upon the present, if not, upon humanity in general. Anamnetic understanding appeals to the human mind to reserve a place for those innocent victims, who, due to economic imperialism, unjust

power relations, or dogmatic systems have been suppressed from our memory and concern. However, these victims represent a permanent appeal towards thinking, they are a convocation to think more anamnatically.

The newspapers report, on a daily basis, of victims of power relations, even when the latter do not concern them directly. Ever so often, unfortunately, these victims are soon forgotten and disappear from the all too short attention span of our contemporary society. With regard to Christian identity, it is necessary not to let our attention to these victims slip. On the contrary, it should form a living, dynamic motivation and perspective to confer meaning upon our lives and orient our actions.

Therefore, theology and liturgy best withhold themselves from abstract and a-historical considerations of the Christian tradition so as to make more room for the concrete experiences of individuals and people when recollecting 'the sacrificed lamb'. People who suffer are authorial figures when it comes to anamnestic understanding. They remind us of the fact that innocent suffering is not 'normal' and, therefore, cannot be presented as a brute fact or simply as 'collateral damage'.

Anamnestic understanding is constitutive for Christian identity. But the Christian anamnestic ritual cannot limit itself to the historical data of the Christ-event. It should encompass the suffering of people from the past and the present.

Finally, to conclude, the shift in anthropological and theological presuppositions concerning the Christian anamnesis requires a reorganisation of the so-called "active participation" of the believers in the liturgy. To perform and carry out the ritual anamnesis in a participative way seems to me an essential condition before one can organise celebrations that make an existential and qualitative difference in an honest way. This includes:

- that participants are able to present their concrete story;
- that the narratives of innocent victims are always listened to in the liturgical rite;
- that the proposed narratives are related to one another;
- that the sensitivity and dynamics of the narratives, the conflicts, ambiguities, deadlocks that are implied in it, are discussed against the background of the narratives of the Christian tradition;
- that those who are going to celebrate cooperate to overcome conflicts and deadlocks, inspired as they are by the anamnesis of the Christian faith;
- that those who are going to celebrate try to find in common the qualitative difference which the Christian faith can represent in concrete situations;

- that celebrations of Christians are anchors for the development of an anamnetic solidarity, precisely because of the *memoria Jesu Christi*. The anamnetic solidarity is a decisive engagement, a style of life. In a narrative way the innocent suffering of human persons, of each human person is related to our own daily attempts to be human. What happened to individuals and peoples in the past must not be forgotten in order to construct a better world.

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