

Disasters, Ritual and Mental Health

1. Ritual expressions

- In Norway more people than ever before turn to the churches for ritual participation when something terrible has happened. These new public and private practices are interesting from the perspectives of ritual studies, clinical psychology of religion, and practical theology. The Scandinavian countries may be regarded as among the most secular in the world. In contrast to this view, it is interesting to observe the emerging ritual repertoire in the public.
- The latest and largest example is the ritual response to the terror in Oslo and Utøya on the 22th of July 2011. The Cathedral of Oslo and the square outside spontaneously became a ritual space. People went there for organized rituals, individual symbolic activities, and they left an ocean of flowers, candles, and memorial notes. Similar places were established all over the country, and people gathered for memorial services, concerts, and marches through the streets, holding roses in their hands.
- The cultural framework for these rituals is the traditional Lutheran protestant tradition of the Scandinavian countries. In Scandinavia these national churches historically have been functioning in strong integration with public and state structures.
- The Church of Norway still has approximately 82% of the Norwegian population as its members. Taking into account that the disaster rituals are part of death ritualizing in our society, it is of particular relevance to observe that the coverage of funeral services by The Church of Norway is at a 90% for the entire population (2008). In the traditional ethnic Norwegian population the figures are even higher.
- The protestant Churches have traditionally been reluctant to lighting candles and performing rituals which might be interpreted as praying for the dead. However, in our latest versions of funeral liturgies, this reluctance has diminished, giving way for new ritual practices. In this period, since the middle of the 1980es, the Norwegian Church has become more ritually open, and the public has become more ritually aware.
- Since the late 1980s memorial services and other forms of ritualizing during the first days after major accidents have become a tradition. By "ritualizing" we mean symbolic behaviour performed in order to create meaning. "Symbol" can be understood as an object that is given value or is a carrier of individual or collective meaning. The meaning making elements in symbolic behavior is not at least to establish or re-establish context and structure and relate to it.
- In the wake of disasters and accidents we have seen many examples of ritualizing - from the simple and spontaneous at the accident site to the more planned and comprehensive rituals at schools and workplaces.
- The increase of public ritualizing after major accidents during the recent 30 years, is not solely a Norwegian phenomenon; it can also be found as a cultural trend in large parts of the world - at least in Europe and the United States. Recent research has shown that there has been a growth in this form of expressions in many parts of the western world, and that this growth has also occurred in a tension between ritual

traditions and needs-oriented innovation. Key researchers in this area are Paul Post et al in the Netherlands, and Ronald Grimes from Canada.

- When an emergency situation occurs, following a catastrophic event of significant impact, a common disaster ritual will be held within the first week after the accident in the acute phase of rescue work, and before the funerals. The disaster rituals are normally staged in the local parish church, and constructed by the local clergy, who also serve the emergency staff. The disaster ritual in the church is put together by components that are familiar to the participants — from funeral, services, and informal symbolic performances. Rescuers and health workers, together with representatives of local schools and authorities, prepare the ritual together with the clergy, and they are all represented in public roles during the ritual, the rescue workers in their working clothes, police in their uniforms etc.
- As part of the press coverage of the accident itself, the disaster ritual is extensively covered by all kinds of media. Rituals after accidents of a national impact sometimes are transmitted on national TV. This was for example the case in the memorial service in the Oslo Cathedral after the terror attack. The King, the Queen, and the Prime Minister were present, and most of the government. From the lectern the Prime Minister addressed the participants. The media coverage of rituals contributes to form expectations and cultural scripts in the public. This perspective is to some extent similar to the idea of cultural resources.
- The literature on crisis therapy refers to the use of rituals as important. However, there is little research-based knowledge about the rituals' form and function, although it is currently high degree of scientific interest in rituals. In the following I will present results from a study of the memorial services after four major accidents with between four and nineteen dead and many injured. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the function of this particular ritual for the participants. The memorial services were held one to five days after the accidents. We interviewed ten relatives, one ambulance driver, and 11 clergy approximately 1 – 1,5 years after the memorial services. The respondents were asked to describe their participation and their experiences in these rituals. In addition to the qualitative interviews, the material consisted of written texts, video recordings and observations.

2. Ritual experiences.

- The bereaved relatives described strong psychological reactions, but in different ways. Some experienced the situation chaotic or out of control, others felt strong aggression or restlessness, while others were more apathetic or withdrawn. Some spoke of existential anxiety or ways of pressure on their faith, for example regarding the question about how God, who is good, could let these terrible things happen.
- Otherwise there was little emphasis on religious questions, for example about death and eternal life, but more about the existential aspects connected with meaning, belonging and psychological and existential coping.
- Most relatives searched for community with others and wanted to come to the memorial service, but not all: The parents of a very young deceased boy said they initially did not want to participate. Most of all they wanted to be with their family at home and not be exposed to many people through a televised church service. When they still participated, it was partly because they had been advised to do so by their

caretakers, but mostly for the sake of their dead child - they wanted him to be represented. Afterwards they did not regret that they had attended.

- Some spoke of an early and strong impulse to ritualize. One mother said that one of the first things she did after she was told that one of her children had perished, was to go to the local church: "As I said, we went to the church, then (...) before we went to the accident site, we had not been there, yet, but I just felt the need to go to the church the first thing in the evening." (Informant 6, female). This woman was a declared non-believer and not a church member. Other relatives told of similar experiences. Quite spontaneous ways of ritualizing occurred both in churches and at the accident sites.
- It seems like the motivation for attending the memorial service increased with the emotional pressure, but that this possible pattern dissolved when the stress was extremely high and the ability to think and act accordingly reduced.
- Many commented upon the role of the church building. The church was experienced as emotionally stimulating and safeguarding, both for the better and for the worse. The qualities of the church room were associated with their special architecture and design, the role of the church in human life, in the local community, as well as in the life rites. A relative said:
"It is not the house that makes the setting, it is what is said and done there, in a way."
(Informant 9, male)
"Said and done" we understand in this context as another term for ritual use.
- Several of the interviewees raised issues associated with the majority church and religious diversity. A respondent with a human-ethical view of life thought that the liturgical expressions of the ritual might be exclusive to non-church members. However, he said that the church-room was ideal, and in practice it would be difficult to find alternative spaces with similar qualities. Many of the bereaved had also been to information meetings and more informal memorial events at cultural centres, theatres, schools etc., but they thought that these types of rooms were associated with events that gave different associations and therefore were not suitable for such a strong emotional and existential ceremony as a memorial service. One of the relative said that the church could be used for many different occasions without having been "used up".
- One ritual feature which all the participants had their strongest memories about was the candle lighting ceremonies – in some occasions combined with reading of the names of the deceased. In the following I will present two cases where this ritual element played an important part.
- **First a women of 39**, who had lost her husband. Initially I will present some quotes from her narrative to make you know how she experienced the ritual.
- *She said about meaning:*
 - "I wanted most of all to stand on the roof of the world and shout out: What is the meaning of this! What is Your purpose with this! There can't be any meaning in this! [...] I did not feel any meaning in what had happened, but I felt it meaningful to be there (at the service)."
- *About anger:*
 - "I was angry with the Lord for what had happened. [...] I wouldn't say I'm a believer, still I sort of have a relationship to the Church through my childhood

faith. But at that moment I was terribly mad at God. I couldn't understand how he could do something so extremely stupid!"

- *About comfort:*

- "I felt so filled up with human warmth. [...] I felt that all of Norway was there to comfort me. [...] When we were gathered that day we were good people to each others. [...] Such a memorial service of course is very sad. On the other hand it was not. It was in a way a strange mixture of being depressed and exhausted. I had a good feeling when I went out of the church, I felt that there were some people who wanted to go with us and comfort us, wanted to be there for us. That is obviously very important."

- *About being in the Sanctuary:*

- "The humans, calling themselves believers or notbelievers, we go to church at the best moments and the most vulnerable moments of life. It is a part of our culture. It is a house where it is high under the ceiling, literally and psychologically. [...] I damned the Lord in all ways, but still I went to his house, you know."

- She returned several times in the interview to how she experienced the lighting of candles and reading of names. She said:

"Reading names one after one was very dignified. [...] I didn't look forward to that; it's ok that *I* say his name, but thinking of others, official persons speaking his name so everyone could hear that it really was *he* who was dead, that was terrible. I really didn't want that. That would make it so certain and true. [...] The only thing I was thinking of was that his name should be read loudly, that would touch the button in me that would make the cup overflow. And so it did."

- In fact, there was no reading of names in this particular ritual, because the names were not yet released from the police, and the clergy actually wanted the lighting of candles to be a more open and multivalent symbol, not only for the deceased.
- It is good reason to think that she actually had a subjective experience of hearing her husband's name being read loudly in the ritual. She was in a very instable emotional condition those first days after the accident, most likely in shock. Another fact was that she had watched another memorial service on TV one month before, and in that service there had been reading of names along with lighting of candles. So there is reason to think that a certain cultural script had made its mark on her expectations. In combination with her very unstable emotional situation this might have coloured her ritual expectations, experiences, and memories. We launched this idea to her in a contact two years after the interview, and she did not reject it, even though she still had a strong memory of the reading of names.
- Anyway, this woman subjectively experienced the reading of names, she returned to this in the interview unasked several times, and she attached great significance to it. She said that it was at the moment when this happened, that she really understood that her husband was dead. In other words, this was an important transitional moment with great impact on her mourning and her ability to start looking forward, plan for the funeral, and think of herself as a widow.
- The participants even described and commented on aspects of the ritual that can be seen as ritualizing in terms of a constructivistic expression of the self, an activity of

cultivating or inventing rites in a deliberate way (Grimes, 2002). This ritual mode is a central focus from a comparative ritual studies perspective — the study of ritual as normal human behaviour and of the subjective involvement of the participant.

- **The second Case** is about the father of a critically injured boy. (45)
- In the middle of the night seven high school boys crashed their van. Four died immediately and three were seriously injured. They were all 18-19 years old and came from the same community, a small town where everyone knows everyone. The day after the accident, a memorial service was held in the town's church. The church was filled with relatives, neighbours and others from the community. The ritual was led by the two ministers of the parish. A highlight of the ceremony was when the names of the dead and seriously injured boys were being read while it was lit a candle for each of them. At the end of the service there was an opportunity for everyone to light candles.
The parents of one of the boys were present. Their son had survived, but was in hospital, seriously injured. The boy's daddy told us that when the candles were lit for one by one of the dead and injured youths he took notice of the candle which was lit for his own son, and he decided that that particular candle he would take with him afterwards. At the end of the service he went together with many others to the front of the church for lighting candles. "For me, lighting candles is an act of hope," he explained. After that he went over to the table next to the altar circle where the seven candles lit for the dead and injured boys were placed. He took the candle that was lit for his son. Later, he always had this candle in his sack when he was visiting his son at the hospital. "I had an intention by doing this," he said. "If something had gone wrong, I would have taken out the candle." His wife said: "But we didn't need to do so." The father continued: "No, but I had it in my sack all the time when I visited him. I haven't ever lit the candle, but we have taken it out and shown it to our son."
- A relevant understanding of the candle in the sack is that this is a symbolic way of connecting the son to the collective ritual. The father's actions can be read as a symbol of hope for survival, and even as magic in a more recent definition of the term. The anticipation of a palliative function of the candle in case of a fatal outcome for the son also fits into this understanding.
- Furthermore, this case illustrates the interactions between public ritual and private incident. Many respondents in our material, like the father in this case, can be said to deliberately cultivate or invent ritual, in a conscious and intentional way. They enter into the ritual to some extent from a constructivistic vantage point. One could ask if there is a relationship between ritualizing in this sense, and the relevance of the ritual to the individual in an existential meaning, and consequently to function.
- **The significance of being in a Sanctuary.** After the terror in Norway last summer, people gathered in their sanctuaries, the Muslims ritualized in their mosques, and the Christians gathered in their churches. There are also many examples of how Christians and Muslims visited each others' sanctuaries. Also, there were funerals for youth with an immigrant background where the rituals were ministered by both a priest and an imam.
- As mentioned, in our study all the participants regarded the church as their first choice for a collective memorial ritual. This was not because these persons frequently used to go there, which none of them did, but because these buildings were built for a ritual purpose, expressing basic community values, and charged with highly emotional ritual

memories from happy and sad events in generations. The strong affiliation to the church is connected with their *rites of passage* experiences.

3. Ritual significance

- The bereaved participants especially pointed at *meaning, belonging, community, and transition* as important aspects regarding their experienced significance of the ritual.
- *It is time to ask: Are disaster rituals therapy?*
- The memorial service takes place during the first acute period after an accident. This overlap between the memorial services and psychosocial health care is unavoidable and necessary. In many communities local clergy and other religious personnel even serve on the psychosocial care staff. This overlap possibly feeds the assumption that these rituals can be understood as a kind of therapy. Such an understanding is limited, and as I try to show in this paper, it leaves a major part of the rituals poorly understood. The rites obviously have healing functions, but paradoxically, a medicalization of these ritual practices may have a contrary effect on their functions.
- The memorial service is a collective ritual response to an extensive experience of crisis. Even if the design of the ritual can be seen as therapeutic, in the meaning that it is designed to meet the emotional needs of the victims and to care for them, the ritual is not to be regarded as therapy. This is because ritual behavior is normal and takes place regularly in non-clinical settings, for instance funeral services, and the performance does not require medical or therapeutic skills in a narrow sense. The disaster ritual is no more therapy than comfort from a friend or help and assistance from a neighbour or a colleague.
- Ideally, post-disaster ritual is normal communal and community behaviour in an extraordinary situation. The communal and non-therapeutic character of the rituals is important so that they do not contribute to a medicalization of the post-disaster efforts, and a subsequent learning of helplessness on the part of the victims.
- I think Pargament's understanding of religion as "search for significance in ways related to the sacred" sheds light on the ritual behaviour after a disaster or tragic accident. What we have seen in Norway last summer and in other occasions is that people are searching for community, comfort and hope in new ways related to the traditional sacred places.
- The sociologist Peter Berger defines religion as "the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established." Death is the ultimate threat with which every society must deal, and most societies use religion to make it endurable. "The power of religion," Berger writes, "depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men [and women] as they stand before death, or, more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it."
- I think it is absolutely interesting that people in a society which by many is regarded as among the most secularized in the world, search order in chaos, community, comfort and significance in stressful times in ways related to the traditional sacred spaces. I am not sure that people would do so when they stand before death, if they did not find the banners from these sacred spaces credible.

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Further presentations of the study:

Danbolt, L. J. & Stifoss-Hanssen, H. (2011). Public Disaster Ritual in the Local Community. A study of Norwegian cases. *Journal of Ritual Studies* vol. 25. nr 2. 2011; 25-36.

Stifoss-Hanssen, H. & Danbolt, L. J. (2010). The dead and the numb body: Disaster and ritual memory. In: Venbrux & Huesken (eds): *Body, Performance, Agency, and Experience*. Harrassowitz. Wiesbaden.

In Scandinavian languages:

Danbolt, L. J. & Stifoss-Hanssen, H. (2007). *Gråte min sang : minnegudstjenester etter store ulykker og katastrofer*. [Kristiansand]: Høyskoleforlaget

Danbolt, L. J. & Stifoss-Hanssen, H. (2007). Minnegudstjeneste etter større ulykker. [Memorial services after major accidents]. *Tidsskrift for Den Norske Laegeforening*, 127, 157-160. [Summary in English.]

Stifoss-Hanssen, H. & Danbolt, L. J. (2011). Folkhälsa, religiös mångfald och ritualer: Existentiell krishandtering och kyrkans roll vid katastrofer. In: V. DeMarinis, O. Wikström & Ö. Cetrez (Eds): *Inspiration till religionspsykologin – kultur, hälsa och mening*. Natur & Kultur, Stockholm.