

True social transitions are few and far between. Of the parents, 90% left the parental home somewhere around their wedding day; of their children, only 8%. Of the latter, 85% already shared a household prior to their getting married; of the former, only 5%. In addition, marriage is less seen as a prelude to parenthood (from 76% to 55%). That there is less of a social transition is also reflected in the assertion that “marriage starts a new stage of life”, backed up by 99% of the older cohort, and just 55% of the younger. A passage of a more emotional nature is decreasingly apparent as well. Against 82% of the older cohort, only 55% of the younger consider marriage “highly consequential”. “Marriage strengthens your relationship” is endorsed by 89% of the older cohort, and only 55% of the younger. Even so, it must be acknowledged that still nearly half of the younger cohort ascribe to marriage *rite of passage*-aspects. This applies in particular to the less educated and to those involved in the church.

Religion is among the social factors most in decline. In the older cohort, 92% had a church ritual; in the younger, 41%. Moreover, 84% of the parents in part decided to marry because “marriage is the norm in our (religious) outlook on life”. Of their children, only 26% did.

As a result, many no longer dismiss the *civil* ritual as just a prerequisite for the church ritual. For them, it has become the pivot of the day. Of the older cohort, 50% consider it “one of the day’s highlights”; of the younger, 69%. Its classification as “the most important moment of the day” gains even more ground, from 33% to 53%. This leaves little room for a civil ritual *free of charge*, going by its halved occurrence (from 20% to 11%).

In detail, the evaluation of the civil ritual has become more favorable as well. It is still predominantly considered ‘traditional’, yet less so than it used to. This supports the notion of pluriformization: the beaten paths are left for supposedly more original variants. In addition, the civil ritual is experienced more as ‘solemn’ (from 48% to 68%) and less as ‘businesslike’ (from 55% to 37%). This tallies with the concept of liturgization: the civil ritual gets semi-religious traits. The increase in the perception of the civil ritual as ‘cheerful’ (from 6% to 21%) matches the thesis that the festive side of ritual is getting ever more prominent. It also backs up the feeling that the ritual is getting less businesslike. After all, these two qualities exclude one another to a large degree.

With the ever higher hopes for the civil ritual the question arises as to how much it is able to meet these expectations. The least that can be said here is that the younger cohort rates it fairly positively, especially when compared to the older.

To conclude the subject of the civil ritual, the younger cohort was asked to indicate for each of its elements just how much it moved them. It appears that the more consequential the act, the more it touches the couple. Likewise, the more the couple is personally involved in the act, the more it is moved. The parents have only been asked whether the rite *as a whole*

moved them. It turns out that it moved them slightly less than their children.

As for the *church* ritual, here too the changes are significant. In the younger cohort, of all the possible reasons to opt for a particular building, only the *atmosphere*-motive stands out. The difference with the older cohort is immense. Being attractive/intimate, by far the most decisive quality for the younger cohort (62%), is almost irrelevant to the older (8%). Conversely, the ‘bride’s home church’, the one dominant motive in the older cohort (85%), matters little to the younger (12%). These days, couples look for style and character, rather than, as their parents did, for familiarity and a ritual embedded in a solid local community. On the subject of time, both cohorts diverge considerably as well, with 95% of the younger having both rituals at the same day, versus 57% of the older. This reinforces the impression of the modern wedding day as the big day on which everything comes together as much as possible.

The younger cohort perceives the service more as ‘cheerful’ (from 17% to 64%) and less as ‘businesslike’ (from 20% to 2%) and ‘traditional’ (from 85% to 64%). This adds to the idea that the festive dimension is on the rise within the church as well. Given these huge differences, it is all the more striking that for the rest both cohorts perceive the church service above all as ‘solemn’, and what is more, both to round about the same extent (90%). This was and is the predominant experience.

Finally, the wedding day *preparations* have changed. The last decades have seen a vast increase in the amount of time invested in either ritual. A preparatory consultation with the registrar is nearly twice as common in the younger cohort as in the older. And as for the church, a wedding service is simply no longer possible without preparatory meetings, often (46%) even three or more. The older cohort talked nowhere near as long to the pastor as the younger. Almost the entire younger cohort (91%) deems these talks pleasant. With 60%, the parents are less enthusiastic. The talks allow both registrars and pastors to give a more personal speech.

Looking over all the contrasts between marriage rituals of the early sixties and marriage rituals of the late nineties, it appears both desirable and possible to condense most of them to a few developments, thus reducing the multitude of numbers to a manageable set of more abstract concepts.

With respect to the *perception* of the marriage ritual, three concepts present themselves: secularization, transitionization, and privatization.

*Secularization* here refers to the evaporation of Christianity as a socio-cultural force, and the ongoing retreat of the churches, along with their ritual repertoires, from public life. Marriage rituals too get more and more withdrawn from church and religion (as does the state of being married).

*Transitionization* refers to a change in the nature of the passage marked by the marriage ritual. This once quite sudden switch to adulthood, stable sexual relations, living on one’s own, cohabitation and the prospect of