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# Stairway to Heaven: LGBTQ+ Gatherings as Civil-Religious Rituals

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## Abstract

This paper applies ritual theory to study public LGBTQ+ gatherings, including Pride parades, silent vigils, and commemorative litanies. The analysis of public LGBTQ+ rituals has often focussed on Pride parades and their carnivalistic exuberance. We call instead for more attention to the whole nexus of public rituals that this movement consists of, and we argue that these rituals are central to LGBTQ+ community building and meaning-making in this social movement. Using participant and non-participant observation, as well as publicly available data, the paper studies assembly forms, ritual scripts, symbolic interactions, sites, and objects that link the various public rituals within the LGBTQ+ movement. We find that, over the last five decades, these ritual elements have coalesced to provide members of the LGBTQ+ community access to the sphere of transcendence. Our findings suggest that this community might be slowly changing its character from social (protest) movement to becoming a viable civil religion.

**Keywords** LGBTQ+ · Structural ritualization · Transcendence · Spirited assembly · Civil religion

## Introduction

Collective rituals are widely recognized as a central tool for protest movements to claim public spaces, communicate their political demands, and build solidarity amongst their participants. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer movement (LGBTQ+) is no exception, as it builds rituals to create visibility and legitimacy for its members and for its agenda of socio-cultural change towards acceptance and inclusion. The most recognized collective ritual for the LGBTQ+ movement is its annual Pride parades, which since the 1970s have retained their double character as both

protest march—complete with confrontations with police and/or counter-protesters—and joyful celebration. Past research has often focused on how Pride parades contribute to the forming of LGBTQ+ group identity, and in a recent study, Conway (2022) discussed the mainstreaming of Pride as a process of lifestylisation. Thus, current developments seem to corroborate Robert Bellah's (Bellah et al. 1985, p. 74) argument that the 'gay community' (his term, not ours) is a lifestyle enclave rather than a civil religion. In this paper, however, we argue that developments of rituals within the LGBTQ+ community are, in fact, better understood as part of a gradual shift from social (protest) movement to a viable civil religion. To support this claim, we investigate the LGBTQ+ movement's use of different public collective rituals, which tap into various registers of transcendence as sources for legitimacy and solidarity.

To this end, we draw on ritual theory to study the symbolic practices that the movement draws on to create and sustain public rituals that connect members to a transcendent sphere. These symbolic practices echo the religious rituals that can be found in the larger social environment that the LGBTQ+ movement is embedded in, including processions, exuberant carnivals, silent vigils, and commemorative litanies. By studying how the LGBTQ+ movement borrowed and then transformed elements of religious ritual interactions from its wider societal surroundings, this article proposes to

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advance scholarly research on LGBTQ+ as a movement and on public collective rituals in two ways. Firstly, we suggest moving the study of public LGBTQ+ events beyond its current focus on Pride parades to include the whole range of rituals that this movement engages in. Secondly, we argue that these rituals connect their participants to a sphere of transcendent meaning. Since the LGBTQ+ movement is ostensibly about engaging in social change in *this* world, we suggest that it is shared ritual practices that allow the movement to take on characteristics of a civil religion.

## LGBTQ+ Rituals and Civil Religion

The research literature on LGBTQ+ inclusion and diversity has seen an enormous growth, and concomitantly, the most visible elements of this movement, the annual Pride parades, have received a lot of attention (Bruce 2016). The existing scholarship tends to focus on the tension that these parades cause within the movement, with some evidence suggesting that they are dominated by middle-class, able-bodied, white males rather than being truly diverse (Conway, 2022; Peterson, Wahlström and Wennerhag 2018a; Peterson, Wahlström and Wennerhag 2018b; Radoman 2016). A second body of research has focused on the question as to whether Pride parades have become too commercialized to still act as an effective voice of social protest (Brown 2007; Drucker 2011; Enguix 2009; Hartal 2020; Kates and Belk 2001; Squires 2019; Volocchi 2017).

In the present context, it is important to note that the literature already acknowledges that Pride parades and other regular public LGBTQ+ events are in fact rituals (see e.g. Mamali and Stevens 2020). Santino (2011, p. 67), for instance, has argued that ‘while a Pride Day gathering appears to be a carnivalesque event, it has at its center a ritualesque dimension. It is this quality, shared with more formal ceremonial rituals, that needs to be addressed and understood; it is what separates Pride Day from other similar-appearing events such as a large public Halloween festival’. Few scholars, however, have *theorized* LGBTQ+ events as ritual. One exception is Enguix (2009) who draws on Victor Turner’s ritual theory to conceptualize Pride parades as ‘anti-structures’, which provide liminal spaces that help challenge what is perceived as the dominant symbolic structure of heteronormative sexualities (and, we might add, cis-normative gender expressions and -identities): ‘Pride Parades are inversion rituals based on visibility that breaks the frontier between the public and the private through theatre and transgression... Thus, social meanings are challenged, destabilized, subverted. In the case of sexual dissidents, participation can also become a liminal step, the crossing of a border’ (Enguix 2009, p. 20; see also Defflem 1991). Similarly, Johnson and Best have analysed Pride

parades as interaction rituals that provide straight parents of gay children with ‘favorable situations that allow for the emergence of interactional ritual chains that propel parents forward in their moral career’ (2012, p. 333).

Interestingly, none of the available literature has connected these parades *as rituals* to the sphere of transcendence. There is some scholarship that has studied the involvement of Christian prayer groups either within the parades or outside them as part of anti-LGBTQ+ protests (Igrutinović, Sremacand and van den Berg 2015). Yet, the parades themselves have so far not been studied in terms of their transcendent character—that is, their ability to transform the individuals that partake in them and, hence, their power to envision (and enact) a reality beyond the present.

## Civil Religion

Interpreting LGBTQ+ rituals as pertaining to collective transcendent experiences is in line with recent attempts in sociology at ‘theorizing modern societies as filled with sacred social centers’ (Alexander 2021, p. 6). These interpretations often circulate around the now well-established theoretical construct of civil religion. According to Robert Bellah, who originally defined the concept as a ‘public religious dimension expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals’, a civil religion is able to imbue the social and political order with sacred authority and is thus able to foster social and cultural integration (Bellah 1967, p. 4; Bellah 1978). A civil religion provides followers with flags, hymns, symbols, martyrs, sacred sites, and annual rituals of commemoration in order to forge bonds of trust that are needed to sustain a core of social solidarity. For Bellah, the heart of a civil religion is not so much an irrational belief in a nation’s superiority, or the worship of a political ideology. A civil religion aims at forming social bonds across political divides and relates to the transcendent experiences of a collective ‘in the light of ultimate and universal reality’ (Bellah 1967, p. 14). Once the focus is set on the collective and transcendent experiences of a social group, including groups that form the background of trans-national and inter-ethnic social movements such as LGBTQ+, it becomes possible to apply the concept of civil religion to them. Applying the concept in such a context is in line with more recent research, which has highlighted that civil religions are not limited to the fostering of a larger national identity. Authors such as Wilson (1980), Woodrum and Bell (1989) and Iwamura (2007) have argued that minority communities often also rely on the mechanics of civil religion to create group cohesion and communal identity that runs in parallel to majoritarian national identity.

This, in turn, raises the question how the secular-oriented rituals of the LGBTQ+ movement might connect participants to transcendent experiences. Sociologists and ethnographers who have studied rituals argue that ritual

performances often share a certain quality, namely their ability to generate powerful, transcendent presence. We find first indications of the ritual quality in the exuberance of many LGBTQ+ events: the sound of music, the shared rhythms, the extravagant clothing, the drinks, the sea of colour and glitter, and the shared feeling that everybody is standing up for something important, lead participants as well as bystanders to create what anthropologist Edith Turner calls a transformative *communitas* of ‘collective joy’ (Turner 2012). This *communitas* aims at providing a space within which one’s ordinary self can become transformed. This is typical for public collective rituals in general, not just for ritualized religious experiences (Mitchell 2009, p. 56; Bloch 1992; Santino 2011). Just as the religious ritual transforms its participants, so do all public rituals. The ritual that a member of the clergy undergoes before mass, and which turns them from a profane person into a ‘priest’, transforms that person’s social role, the space they are acting in, and the relationship they have to other people (Bell 1992, pp. 109–113). Similarly, participants in public rituals perform rules-based acts to step in and out of the role they hold within the ritual. This insight is important for our theorization of LGBTQ+ as a civil religion: the self-transformative stepping-in and -out of ordinary roles is not merely a private affair, a psychological state of mind, but is intimately connected to the transformation of social identity (Joas 2001; 2021).

As such, elements of sacred rituals lend themselves for adaptation and creolization. In other words, sacred rituals that are familiar from a religious context can be adapted *selectively* to serve the need of new, non-religious rituals (Platvoet 2006; Summers-Effler 2006, pp. 149–152). This is not to make the case for the total meaninglessness and interchangeability of ritual elements, as claimed by some (Staal 1979), but rather to call attention to the complex nature of many of the rituals that today form a central part of the LGBTQ+ movement. Looking at these rituals, it is not difficult to discover their borrowings from and adaptations of more traditional religious rituals.

### Structural Ritualization Theory

According to Structural Ritualization Theory (SRT), such borrowings and adaptations do not take place randomly but are part of a struggle over symbolic resources (Knottnerus 1997). SRT suggests that rituals are used by sub-groups who replicate rituals to either reproduce or strategically undermine symbolic power relationships found in their social environment. In new rituals, actors in the sub-groups use, adapt, and modify the ‘symbolic and social resources they inherit. They are not simply reflections of the wider milieu. These newly developed routines in turn become established, solidified, and enduring social arrangements, that is, objectified. Once formed, the rituals and structure

of the embedded group have a direct impact on the habits of thought and action of its members’ (Knottnerus 1997, p. 258). Knottnerus’ theorization of the structuration of rituals allows us to read LGBTQ+ rituals on their own terms, so to speak, rather than as copies of Christian religious rituals. In this paper, we apply SRT and identify mechanisms of *structural* ritualization through which the LGBTQ+ movement first adapted mainstream Christian religious rituals, and then symbolically connected them to new transcendent social aims and spheres, namely sacred sites, the commemoration of sacred events, the mourning of the dead, and the eschatological hope for the coming of a world without oppression. In particular, we focus on three collective rituals that are prominent within the LGBTQ+ movement: the carnivalistic procession, the vigil, and the litany.

### Research Methods and Data

Beginning from ethnographic fieldwork on Pride parades, our research moves beyond the specific ritual character of parades to also understand other LGBTQ+ events as rituals. We focus on processions, vigils, and litanies, understanding these as forms of *spirited assembly*, that is, group meetings which follow a particular structure and regularity, and which aim to connect group members to a transcendent moral plane that is not captured by ordinary laws or conventional psychological explanations. Through spirited assembly, participants can have experiences that go beyond their immediate existence, experiences that result in very potent feelings of self-transcendence. These emotions, in turn, help participants make sense of extraordinary experiences of grief and sorrow, but also of hope and empowerment.

Since ritual interactions are symbolic practices, we structured our field and desk research by looking at more than observable behaviours, but also at the visual culture of public collective LGBTQ+ events, dress codes, and invisible rules of interaction. In addition, we paid attention to auditory cues and LGBTQ+ sound culture. In line with symbolic-interactionist theory of ritual, we also decided to investigate the ‘cultish things’ used by the movement, in other words the symbolic role played by objects whose presence at LGBTQ+ events is now taken for granted, such as the rainbow flag. We define the role of these ritual artefacts as that of ‘ordinary objects being placed in locations where they gain a sense of meaning from their surroundings’ (Wilson 2018, p. 130).

In studying how processions, vigils, and litanies are used by the LGBTQ+ movement, we conducted research in two different modes, and constructed the analysis accordingly. First, we drew on publicly available historical material that documents main events and developments of the movement. We supplemented the historical material with our own experiences from years of participant and non-participant

observation of public LGBTQ+ events of different types and in different locations. Second, we formalized and specified our ongoing observations through a study of the organization and celebration of 2021 WorldPride and EuroGames in Copenhagen and Malmö. WorldPride is a series of international LGBTQ+ events that is held regularly in major global cities. The first WorldPride event was held in 2000 in Rome, Italy, and other cities have included Jerusalem, London, Toronto, and Madrid. Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, 2019 WorldPride was held in New York. Behind these events is a Texas-registered non-profit organization called InterPride that organizes the bidding process to become WorldPride host. WorldPride, which usually lasts ten days, follows a particular choreography of events. There are opening and closing ceremonies that include speeches, concerts, and parties; there is the main Pride parade hosted by the local Pride partner; and there is an LGBTQ+ Human Rights conference. At WorldPride Copenhagen, an estimated 15,000 people participated in the Opening Parade, with over 100,000 spectators. The main townhall square, with food stalls and concert stages, was visited by approximately 100,000 people. At the LGBTQ+ sports events that were held in parallel, the so-called EuroGames, over 1800 athletes representing 49 nations competed with each other (Taylor 2021).

Attending the various events at WorldPride 2021, we followed Spradley's (1980) three-stage process of observation, beginning first with obtaining an overview of the settings and surroundings, then moving to focussed observation, and then selecting observation situations that involved not merely movements and behaviours, but *ritualistic interactions*. We collected observations in notebooks that the authors regularly shared and analysed. In addition to the gathering of fieldnotes, we took pictures and short videos of ritual interactions at these events. This process was carried out in an unobtrusive way as it has now become a habit of both participants and bystanders to record material on hand-held smartphones. Together, our research draws on over one hundred pages of fieldnotes and several thousand images and videos. These two sets of data—historical and observational—enabled us, first, to identify prevalent and recurrent processions, vigils, and litanies in the LGBTQ+ movement and, second, to detail how these three ritual forms were enacted at 2021 WorldPride. Accordingly, the three analytical sections below will first establish the ritual and then detail its enactment in specific instances.

## The Carnival Procession

The original event commemorated by Pride parades all over the world is the police raid on the Stonewall Inn on New York's Christopher Street on the night of June 28th 1969.

The ensuing Stonewall Riots have turned into a myth, with competing memories overlapping and contradicting each other. Crucially, it is from within the movement itself that people have begun referring to the Stonewall Inn as a 'sacred site' and the night as a mythical, sacred event (Carter 2005, 145; *New York Times* 2015; O'Neill 2019). For a site to be considered sacred, it must be linked to an extraordinary event and its commemoration. Such an event can come in the form of an unusual incident and an extraordinary experience. In the case of the Stonewall Inn, its sacrality and symbolic prominence for the movement arises from the extraordinary experience of the night of June 28th 1969 as an event connected to violence—a violence that helped protect a persecuted minority from being scapegoated.

That particular night in June 1969 presents itself as a textbook case for Durkheim's (2001, p. 163) notion of 'collective effervescence'. Numerous eyewitnesses confirmed that there seemed to be a special mood in the crowd outside the Stonewall Inn that night, an exceptional spirit bubbling up, which they had not seen before during the frequent bar raids by the police in Greenwich Village (Carter 2005, p. 179). Ritual theory predicts that social groups maintain and regenerate the original feelings attached to such extraordinary moments through shared rituals, symbols, and stories (Olaveson 2001). The commemoration of the original 1969 riots in contemporary Pride parades reflects the mythical status of the Stonewall Inn as sacred site. For instance, local LGBTQ+ movements all over North America and Europe promoted the myth of that night by naming their rallies 'Christopher Street Liberation Day' marches or 'Christopher Street Day' (CSD) marches (Shield 2020). These marches started in 1970 in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles and were copied in Europe from the early 1970s onwards. The fact that these events were designed right from the beginning as 'commemorative' marches feeds into the mythological and transcendent nature of the site and the event (Armstrong and Cragg 2006).

Today, LGBTQ+ Pride parades are being held in June or August in numerous countries around the globe, and while they continue to commemorate the mythic night of the 'Christopher Street Liberation', they also combine ritualistic elements of carnival, pageant, and procession. Pride is a reversal ritual in which social roles are turned upside-down and behavioural norms are temporarily suspended. The role reversals that are celebrated at Pride aim at cis-heterosexual normativity. Sexual and gender identities, as seen in drag and trans culture, which are repressed and hidden in daily life, are publicly celebrated. An element of pageantry has come to the fore at Pride parades as sponsors and support groups hire or themselves construct floats. From these floats, music is played, foam bubbles are sprayed over onlookers, and people dance, wave hands, and throw small gifts. As in all carnivals, music, alcohol, and play are central features.



The suspension of social norms by parading bodies, symbols, and little theatrical plays on wagons and carts through the streets emerged in the Middle Ages, when they were integral part of mystery plays and processions on religious holidays (Testa 2021). Ever since, pageant wagons have been a staple of carnival processions on the eve of Lent. Comparing Pride processions with religious carnivals, past and present, allows us to identify several elements that give Pride the character of a civil-religious ritual. Amongst them are the interplay of crowds and music, symbolic uniformity, masking and cross-dressing, communal consumption and wastefulness, and their commemorative origins.

Music and sound always played an important role in the history of the LGBTQ+ movement. Audible signs of ritualization were there from the beginning of the movement, in the form of coordinated slogans that were shouted by the ‘gay liberation’ protest marchers during the 1970s (‘Come Out!’; ‘Hey, hey, ho, ho! Homophobia has got to go’). As the first home-made floats arrived at these marches, made of cardboard and papier-mâché, portable cassette-recorders and loudspeaker systems entered, too. The entry of musical elements into the marches was certainly enhanced when in 1980 the New York ‘Gay Liberation March’ for the first time featured a Community Marching Band. It was the arrival of a music band which turned gay liberation from a *march* into a *parade*. The element of music is paramount for the ritualistic nature of Pride, as music is often associated with the creation of collective effervescence that lifts the spirit and creates a communion of strangers. This is even more the case when the crowd knows the lyrics of a song. Today, the organizers of many Pride parades select an annual theme song that gets played from boom boxes at the parades. The organizers of Copenhagen 2021 WorldPride created an official playlist of tracks based on wishes from community members, and a rendition by the pop-music group ‘Aqua’ of Gloria Gaynor’s classic LGBTQ+ hymn ‘I am What I Am’ was announced as the official event anthem. But the ritualistic nature of music at Pride goes deeper than that. While there is an entire genre of ‘gay anthems’ that has attracted some research interest (Halberstam 2019), it is the ritualistic *joining in* of the crowds in songs and hymns that affords the parades their effervescent and unifying potential.

At the WorldPride marches that made their way through Copenhagen’s old city centre, protesters and revellers joined in mainstream anthems with political signalling values, such as singing loudly and forming the letters ‘YMCA’ with their arms when the eponymous song by the Village People was played from boom boxes. Ritual uniformity is also provided by other, at times equally coordinated means. In our research, we found a surprisingly high amount of self-imposed uniformity in the dresses and costumes that people wear. Observing the build-up to the parades in Copenhagen and New York over several years, we found that employees

who join the floats of sponsors typically gather before the start of the parade to change into some form of uniform, such as t-shirts with Pride-themed company logos and slogans. Other groups of people who join the parades individually often also show signs of mild uniforming, for example by dressing as devils and angels, in rainbow colours, or in pink, not to mention kink at Pride with participants wearing leather, harnesses, and other fetish items. Members of the armed forces and other emergency services (first responders, fire fighters, civil defence, etc.) march in their uniforms under the slogan ‘serve with pride’ and have, throughout the years, established preparatory rituals of their own, which have since become a tradition for them. They also change back to civilian clothing after the Pride parades have come to their conclusion. While not at all an uncontentious issue, the presence of uniforms that are typically associated with functions of state and public administration means that the LGBTQ+ movement has successfully managed to subsume other civil-religious symbols—such as the Stars and Stripes in the United States, the Union Jack in the United Kingdom, or the Danish Dannebrog symbol—under its unifying umbrella. This finding once again highlights that the civil religion of Pride should not be read purely through the lens of civic or national identity, but as an assemblage of symbols, liturgies, and rituals that exist very much in parallel to mainstream civil religion.

The arrival of dress codes and rainbow paraphernalia at the Pride parades contributes to their visual coherence—and hence their character as a unifying ritual. A major push in this direction was provided by the now ubiquitous presence of the rainbow flag. This flag itself always had political-theological connotations. In the 1520s, rebellious peasants in Germany used the flag to remind themselves and their enemies of the biblical meaning of the rainbow as a token of the covenant between God and his creation (*Genesis* 9:13). In 1978, Gilbert Baker used the same colours to express hope and joy for the LGBTQ+ movement, and so, it made its first appearance at the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade in June that year (Baker 2019). At the Copenhagen Pride 2021 events, we noticed the presence of many different types of rainbow flags. In addition to the original eight-coloured flag that has become available for purchase everywhere, we spotted evidence of how the flag had developed since the 1990s, with brown and black stripes added to indicate racial inclusion, and the white, light blue, and pink triangle for the trans community. At the 2021 event, we found that the organizers had used tents, public exhibits, and durable plastic cups to explain the meanings and the development of the flag’s colours.

While early LGBTQ+ marches featured no costumes, the carnivalistic element of masking and of ‘dressing up’ has become more central in recent decades. The concern persists that the printed t-shirts, the kink, and fetish together

have taken the political character out of Pride. Still, early LGBTQ+ marches also tended to look very middle-class, white, and homosexual. It is the more recent theatrical elements that have enabled cross-dressing, transgender, Drag Queens, Asian and Black queers, and so many more to join what today is a carnivalistic procession. In line with Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, contemporary anthropological research interprets the carnival as a celebration of chaos, unrestrained interaction between strangers, a celebration of eccentric and norm-violating behaviour, the joining of people that would normally go separate ways (rich and poor, old and young, different ethnicities and cultures, NGOs and investment banks), the profanation of common rules of piety, and the overturning of earthly hierarchies and norms (Santino 2011; Testa 2021). At the same time, the Copenhagen WorldPride event also serves as an example of the limits that LGBTQ+ movements run into when aiming to unify *all* voices under one roof, or one flag. On August 21st 2021, in parallel to WorldPride in Copenhagen's city centre, a smaller march set off in the northern neighbourhood of Nørrebro, which deliberately understood itself in opposition to what it perceived as a 'commercialized', white, and mainstream event in the city. At Nørrebro Pride—as it is publicly known—participants aim to lay bare the broader societal race and class structures that are perpetuated in the movement itself. For example, the guidelines for the Nørrebro Pride opening party reminded people that it is 'not a space for white/cis/het consumption' but, rather, 'a QTIBIPOC [queer, trans, bi, indigenous and people of color] separatist event', and explained why participants that are straight and/or white may be denied access. Similarly, the organizing principles for the demonstration itself saw it divided into several blocks to foreground QTIBIPOCs in the front, followed by Afro Dane Youth (queers of African descent), Kalaallit Nunaat (for Greenlandic people), and LGBT Asylum (for asylum seekers and their friends), and ending with white allies (open to all) in the back (Burø, Friis Christensen, and Guschke, [forthcoming](#)).

## The Vigil

The opposition in 2021 between Copenhagen WorldPride and Nørrebro Pride shows that different sections within the LGBTQ+ movement have different understandings of norm inversion. Yet, it is also clear that norm inversion, norm subversion, and norm questioning remain the aim of public LGBTQ+ events. This can be observed in the less glitzy and more serene rituals that are also very much at the heart of the movement, and which also invoke the language of the sacred. A major vehicle for the acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights has been the liturgy of the vigil (Latin *vigilia* = wakefulness, watchfulness). In parallel to mainstream American

civil religion, the LGBTQ+ movement has incorporated the religious ritual of watchful observance, of keeping awake in silence in order to commemorate, pray, meditate, and draw attention to social injustice. During the 1960s, gay rights societies in Philadelphia and New York organized annual protests, so-called Annual Reminders or Reminder Days. Activists would march in a picket line outside public and government buildings and protest in silence to draw attention to the fact that gay people lacked basic civil rights (Stein 2004, pp. 273–295). Yet, these events were more part of an emerging tradition of orderly civic protest.

Vigils, by contrast, are characterised by silent prayer or meditation, the use of candles or other small lights (today, mobile phone lights often replace candles), and they are held during the hours of darkness to signify wakefulness as a form of resistance against the 'normal' habit of sleeping at night. Most often, the ritual of the vigil is used to symbolically overcome the evil powers of death and night (darkness), and to express attachment to those that have died. In other words, both religious and secular rituals of the vigil are in one way or another connected to the transcendent factor of death (Sabak 2017).

The ubiquity of death constituted a historical break in the collective experience of being gay during the early 1980s. After a decade that had witnessed massive progress in terms of social acceptance, the sudden arrival of a new virus, termed the 'gay plague', seemed to destroy all that had been achieved. The Aids crisis brought back to the fore widespread homophobic sentiments, when public health campaigns stigmatized gay sexuality as the cause for the disease, which was initially termed GRID—'gay-related immune deficiency' or even 'the gay cancer'. Gay rights groups all over the US became decimated, and crucial functions within the movement were taken over by women because so many gay men were wasting away in hospitals. With mainstream media being vindictive and doctors helpless, the American pharma industry and the US government initially proved to be very unwilling to fund research because of the stigma that surrounded the new illness. Thus, the arrival of the Aids crisis constituted a break in the transcendent experience of LGBTQ+ identifying people and the entire movement: after years of winning legal and cultural battles, death was suddenly everywhere.

As a response to this crisis of collective experience, the movement took an element from the wider socio-symbolic environment it was embedded in to structure a new ritual. In May 1983, activists in San Francisco and New York drew on the form of the vigil in what became the first AIDS Candlelight March. The posters that were distributed in both cities stated that the march was a 'Personal Expression to Honor the Dead and Support the Living'. Unlike the Gay Liberation Parades, which stretched over miles and brought out thousands upon thousands of people by the early 1980s, the

first AIDS vigils were much more subdued affairs. The candlelight march in New York started at 8 pm and gathered at Sheridan Square Park, a few yards away from the Stonewall Inn. Its route led to Federal Plaza, about two miles south (Roman 1998, pp. 23–32). The darkness of the night and the restrained light of the candles provided the background for a collective ritual that could not be more different from the noisy ‘Come Out’ marches that had become mass events a decade earlier. At the San Francisco march, the few speeches that were made were all heard in silence. As one participant later remembered: ‘you could hear a pin drop for each speaker’ (Wilson 2010).

Yet, importantly, something else happened at the first Aids vigils that shows how this ritual was not a mere copy of a Christian ritual, but a *structured* ritualization and new adaptation. Both the organizers in San Francisco and in New York asked participants to bring candles. Some also brought banners that read ‘Fighting for our lives’. Further, the New York organizers requested participants not just to bring a candle, but also to wear black armbands with a pink triangle. This was the symbol the Nazis had used to mark homosexual prisoners in their concentration camps. The introduction of the pink triangle thus fused the Christian ritual of wakefulness for the dead with the memory of another collective experience of death, the mass murder of homosexuals in Nazi concentration camps.

The first vigils of 1983 helped create a new ritual within the LGBTQ+ movement, namely the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial Days that are typically held on a Sunday in May. Today, candlelight vigils are held in hundreds of cities all over the globe. The ritual of the vigil was adapted and transformed spontaneously within the movement, but always appeared when there was a need to respond to experiences of suffering, violence, and death. For example, there are now regular vigils held on ‘Transgender Day of Remembrance’ to honour those that were killed in acts of anti-trans violence (Renn and Pitcher 2016, p. 3). In 2016, many vigils were held spontaneously to commemorate the 49 people killed in the shooting at the ‘Pulse’ night club in Orlando, Florida, in June that year. As regards the vigil, a ritual script has emerged that includes the rainbow flag, candles, the reading out names of victims, and minutes of silence. Religious prayers are also included when events are held at places of worship.

At Copenhagen WorldPride in 2021, the organizers ensured that spaces and opportunities were provided for commemorative, reflective, and dolorous acts of vigil. For instance, some churches opened their spaces for individual acts of silent commemoration by members of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, there were also collective acts of spontaneous vigil. As an example of the latter, we witnessed several instances of moments of silence being held at various events for a French water polo competitor, Etienne Burguy,

who had died tragically after playing a game on the opening day of EuroPride games in Copenhagen on 17 August. In mentioning the name of the athlete during a reception with the Danish Minister for Equality, the Director of 2021 WorldPride took time to also emphasize the fragility of life more generally, thereby acknowledging and connecting to ‘all those who could not be among us today’ with the repeated plea for remembering them.

## The Litany

The AIDS-related activism of the early LGBTQ+ movement helped produce yet another ritual with transcendent underpinnings and a religious equivalent, namely the litany of remembrance. In November 1985, activist and artist Cleve Jones had the idea to create an object that memorializes the names of people who had died from Aids. Out of this emerged the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, a hand-crafted and continuously growing display of the names of Aids victims. In October 1987, during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the quilt was displayed for the first time on the Mall. All 1920 names that formed the original quilt were read out aloud (Ruskin 1988, pp. 137–145). In many public displays that followed, the project included blank fabric panels on which visitors could write whatever came to their mind, such as memories of deceased persons or direct messages to them. These sheets then became part of the overall fabric of the quilt, which thus forms a memorial text that bears witness to suffering and death. At the first unfolding of the panels in October 1987, video evidence shows that the voices of those who spoke out the names cracked under the load of emotion. Bystanders, family members, and friends cried and comforted each other (ABC News Washington 1987). In this way, the NAMES project actively solicited dialogue with the dead and acted as a medium to reach and remember them (Jensen 1988). This connection renders the quilt a sacred object to this day. It is part of a covenant between the dead and the living since it aims to ensure that ‘never again will a community be harmed because of fear, silence, discrimination, or stigma’ (*National AIDS Memorial*, 2021).

Today, the quilt contains the names of over 120,000 people and weighs 54 tons. Like the travelling relic of the Middle Ages, parts of the quilt can be moved from location to location, allowing people to connect to the experiences of death and suffering. The quilt becomes the site of a ritualistic litany (Greek *litaneia* = entreaty, plea) when its public display brings together family members, friends, and activists who read out aloud the names of the people named on the quilt. In the same ways as the Catholic Litany of the Saints centres on singing aloud the names of martyrs, the public reading of the names on the



quilt uses the reiteration of the names of the dead to give death a meaning, and to create a publicly shared, collective memory in a ritualistic fashion (Hawkins 1993; Lewis and Fraser 1996). Since 1987, the ceremonial unfolding of the Quilt follows a particular pattern: it is put in the middle of a group of people, who before the unfolding stand in a moment of silence and then slowly unfold the quadrants in a carefully choreographed and sombre way (National AIDS Memorial, 2020). Some have compared the ritualistic unfolding of the quilt at public events to the military procedure for folding and unfolding the American flag (Weinberg 1992, p. 38). The slow pace, the solemn choreography, the moving tributes to the dead, and the silence make it clear that one is in the presence of a sacred object.

Our observations at WorldPride 2021 once again confirm that the LGBTQ+ movement creatively adapts older material and symbolic elements to playfully create new rituals with links to the transcendent. During Pride week in August that year, a human rights conference was held at a conference venue in Copenhagen's city centre. At the back of the hall, numerous segments from the Danish version of the Aids quilt were exhibited, complete with small plaques that explained the provenance of the quilt. Here, the organizers clearly paid homage to the spirit of the original memorial quilt. As the memory and urgency of the Aids crisis is slowly fading in public awareness, the movement has created a new litany in form of a dress, which is beginning to receive more attention. Conceived in 2016 at the Amsterdam EuroPride festival, the Amsterdam Rainbow Dress is made up of the flags of countries that punish homosexuality. Currently, the dress features over 70 flags and its diameter is approximately 16 meters. Each time a country decriminalizes homosexuality, the nation's flag is replaced with a rainbow flag. The Amsterdam dress thus moves the ritual form of the litany from commemorating individual death by disease to death and suffering from state power. As a list of names that pleas with power, it nevertheless remains a litany. Like the quilt, the dress is a travelling relic, too. In 2021, it was moved to Copenhagen town hall, where it was exhibited alongside a 30-m-long rainbow flag made by Gilbert Baker in 1993, and an exhibition from the city archives about the history of Copenhagen with regard to the first same-sex registered partnerships in 1989. The dress was revealed, following an informal reception by the Dutch Ambassador at the Rainbow Square next to the town hall, at which it was highlighted that since its inception, the flags of five nations had been removed from the dress and one added. Amongst the speakers at the reception was the Human Rights Director of 2021 WorldPride, who stressed that the dress, despite its beauty, shows that 'we are not equal, until we are all equal'.

## Discussion

LGBTQ+ is more than an identity-based social movement, it is also a nexus of public collective rituals that together provide elements and building blocks of a civil religion. The Pride parades, which a lot of critical scholarship have recently focused on, are merely one such building block that is interconnected with other civic-religious rituals, such as LGBTQ+ wedding ceremonies held during Pride week, and the church services that are now also integrated into the roster of Pride-related events in many places. The evidence presented here suggests that major LGBTQ+ events such as Pride parades and Candlelight Marches are not fully described by calling them either 'demonstrations' or 'celebrations'. Their liturgical character, their symbolic import, and their scheduled return render them civil-religious rituals.

From this perspective, it appears short-sighted to conceptualize them as lifestyle events (*cf.* Conway 2022). We believe that LGBTQ+ events of various kinds, including the Pride parades, are better understood from the perspective of their structural ritualization. As in any civil religion, different rituals fulfil very different functions. Services on Memorial Sunday are no more 'American' than the fireworks and parties on Independence Day merely because the former are sombre and the latter more joyful. What makes an event a ritual within a civil religion is not their displayed level of political dissent, but their connection to collective transcendent experiences. In the case of national civil religions, the transcendent experiences are brought about by the trauma of war, breakdowns of states, persecution, collective violence, and death, but also liberation from oppression, revolutions, and new beginnings (Bellah 1967). In the case of the LGBTQ+ community, the trauma of discrimination calls for—and calls forth—transcendence: not only as experienced during the Aids crisis of the 1980s and '90s, but during centuries of imprisonment, death sentences, forced sterilizations, pathologization, humiliation, organized black-mailing campaigns, and so on.

In a civil religion, spontaneously emerging rituals reflect collectively shared transcendent experiences. A key signifier of a civil religion is that its adherents understand their own presence in the light of an ultimate, universal, and transcendent reality (Bellah 1967, pp. 12, 18; Bellah 1973; Gorski 2017, pp. 16–17). Once we interpret public LGBTQ+ rituals in these terms, it is not hard to spot the many symbolic bridges that link these rituals to transcendent historical experiences. When the 1983 New York Candlelight March organizers asked participants to wear the pink triangle, they clearly reflected their own cause in the light of the trauma of the Nazi period. Similarly, the

Aids Memorial Quilt brings the collective experience of death very close to observers. Each quilt panel has the standard size of three by six feet, a little shorter than the size of an average grave. The quilt is more than a list of names. Its panels also often contain photographs, human hair, cremation ashes, jewellery, clothing, and other items that identify individual human beings.

For a regular event to be more than merely a ‘tradition’ but a civil-religious ritual, it needs to both provide connections to the transcendent and invite opportunities for communal exuberance. The latter can be characterised as shared feelings of high social energy, that is, the positive feedback one receives from joining in with strangers. Such exuberance or ‘effervescence’ does not have to lead exclusively to the collective sharing of joyful emotions. Collectively shared grief and sorrow, groups of people crying spontaneously or kneeling in prayer, can create long-lasting community bonds. While the NAMES project memorializes the experience of suffering, the Pride parades celebrate the experience of stepping into a climate of acceptance and inclusion. At WorldPride 2021, we observed how these two experiences can merge. *Both* experiences, that of trauma *and* the joy of overcoming death, relate to the transcendent, universal realm. For these experiences to shape an entire civil religion, they need to be regularly celebrated, remembered, and renewed in form of events that energize participants to such a level that individuals also experience a transformation and a sense of extraordinariness. Durkheim (2001, pp. 157–164) famously described the intense energy that is experienced during these events in terms of collective effervescence, a collective excitement caused by communities coming together and experiencing a kind of rapturous unity.

In the case of public collective LGBTQ+ rituals, it is often music, singing, and occasionally dance that contribute to an atmosphere that allows strangers to join, to transgress social norms, to turn traditional hierarchies upside-down, and to break down social distances. In these activities, a space of communal liminality is formed, a space that promotes some levels of collective ego-loss, which in turn is a conduit for the experience of transcendence. We find such moments of *communitas* both along Pride parade routes and in the silence at candlelight vigils. Our study thus shows that public collective LGBTQ+ events not only have a ritualistic character, but that these rituals are clearly structured so as to connect participants to a transcendent sphere. This is unsurprising given that these rituals aim at creating bonds within a community borne out of suffering and persecution.

Our research shows that LGBTQ+ rituals emerged spontaneously, which means they grew out of local initiatives by private individuals which initially had no grand design behind them. They changed structure and content over time and only slowly formed a ritual script. For instance, Pride started as commemoration and protest march, without music

being involved. According to Structural Ritualization Theory, ritual scripts are open to change as social movements adapt to new ideas and challenges. This is what we observe in the case of LGBTQ+. For example, many large cities now have several LGBTQ+ marches during summer: an ‘official’ parade with private and public sector sponsors, and events that are deliberately ‘anti-mainstream’ protest marches without sponsors. Another example is the script of the vigil: it was only the New York part of the original 1983 Candlelight March that featured the pink triangle as a symbolic link to the concentration camps. This ritual artefact served as a powerful symbol, which subsequently made it into numerous Aids awareness campaigns and famous poster designs during the 1980s. Yet, it has now almost disappeared and been replaced by the rainbow flag, which for a while existed in parallel to the triangle. A final example is the AIDS quilt, the idea for which was borne spontaneously out of placards hung up outside San Francisco City Hall at a memorial event for the murdered Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk. Thus, our research points to the ability of the LGBTQ+ movement to engage in high levels of what sociologists and anthropologists refer to as ‘ritual innovation’ (Brettschneider 2003).

Core elements of the rituals we studied in this paper were initially borrowed from the heritage of Christianity and thus the wider socio-symbolic environment that LGBTQ+ activists found themselves in. This environment provided cues that allowed the movement to fuse various ritualistic elements, such as the spirited assembly in the form of procession, carnival, and vigil, the sacred site (Stonewall Inn), sacred memory (litany for the dead), and sacred objects (Aids Quilt). These observations, too, are in line with Structural Ritualization Theory. But LGBTQ+ rituals emerged spontaneously and also continue to be shape-shifting. Their form never was and still is not a mere copy of Christian ‘originals’. They were *structured* so as to achieve the same aims of community coherence and access to the transcendent as source of legitimacy, solidarity, and self-identity. With the help of Knottnerus’ SRT and Bellah’s notion of civil religion, our observations challenge scholars that have interpreted public collective LGBTQ+ events merely as an expression of neoliberal commercialization of protest. Yet, we challenge also those that see in these rituals mainly an extension of Christian visual rhetoric and values (Krutzschn 2019, p. 3).

Finally, our observations and theorization take issue with an unreflected but widespread assumption that the collective emotions displayed at LGBTQ+ events are merely self-referential. In other words, most of the literature in the field studies the way *how* emotions are created at Pride events and the political demands they are reflective of. What this scholarship avoids, however, is to acknowledge what Hans Joas (2021) has called ‘the power of the sacred’—despite

the fact that this power is staring us in the face (see amongst others Day, 2022). Moving beyond the opposition between ‘neoliberal’ commercialized fun and ‘authentic’ political demonstration, our theorization allows us to see that collective LGBTQ+ emotions aim at a referent that is external to the people gathered at these events. This external referent comes in the form of ‘shared *transcendent* cultural ideals’ (Schwarz, 2023).

## Conclusion

We used Structural Ritualization Theory and the work of Robert Bellah to argue that the collective meaning-making at public collective LGBTQ+ events in many ways fits Bellah’s definition of what he called a civil religion. In our research, we studied aspects of the LGBTQ+ movement from the perspective of the sacred. Seen from this perspective, public LGBTQ+ events are not merely social protests but closely tied to several elements that are typical for sacred rituals, such as the spirited assembly, the enchanted site, and the myth of sacred objects. Together, they provide the movement with opportunities to ritually connect community members to transcendent experiences. We also saw that these rituals were not fixed, but of high plasticity and open to outside influence. We should expect further changes in LGBTQ+ rituals as there is no way of predicting what the ritual structure of the movement might look like in a few decades from now. Half a century ago, in June 1970, when the first Christopher Street Liberation Day marchers walked in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, few people would have predicted that these could become parades of the public import they have today. It remains to be seen how the movement’s liturgies will adapt to the now widely shared concern over the supposed mainstreaming and gentrification of LGBTQ+ activism.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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