

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Need a Minister? How About Your Brother?": The Universal Life Church between Religion and Non-Religion"

Dusty Hoesly*

National media outlets have observed that weddings in the United States, especially for young educated people, are increasingly performed by ministers who are friends or relatives of the couple and who become ordained online just for that purpose. The primary organization licensing these ministers, and thus authorizing these weddings as legally valid, is the Universal Life Church (ULC), which has ordained over 20 million people since 1962. To date, there has been no focused study of the ULC or lifecycle rituals conducted under its auspices. According to my original survey, interview, and participant observation data, both ULC ministers and the couples who engage them typically self-describe as non-religious, usually as spiritual, seekers, humanist, or generically "not religious." Similarly, they describe their weddings in "non-religious" terms, emphasizing the personalization of the ceremony to match their particular beliefs and tastes as well as the conscious exclusion of most "religious" language. These "secular" or "spiritual" wedding ceremonies reveal non-religious couples' desires for an alternative apart from bureaucratic civil ceremonies or traditional religious rites. This article explains why "secular" people select ULC ministers for their weddings, how ULC ministers see themselves as "non-religious" while being members of a legally-recognized religion, and how ULC ministers and couples married by them label and value their "non-religious," personalized wedding ceremonies. My examination of ULC membership and weddings reveals not only the diversity of non-theistic self-identification and lifecycle ritualization, but also how constructs such as "religious" and "secular" can be co-constitutive rather than purely oppositional.

Introduction

In 2003, the *New York Times* reported that couples increasingly sought someone they knew to officiate their wedding, rather than a traditional religious cleric or secular civil official (Lehmann-Haupt). The article featured the stories of several couples who desired a personal relationship with their officiant, a friend or relative who would share their worldview and perform a more intimate, meaningful ceremony. One bride, who was described as not religious, said, "If you have no church, then you create your own authority figure" who can perform the ceremony. Donal MacCoon, also quoted in the article, said, "I'm not an anonymous priest. I'm [the bride's] brother, and because of that relationship there was a lot to draw on." According to the article, these officiants and couples reflect a new norm for American wedding culture.

Rachel Lehmann-Haupt, the reporter, listed several reasons for the growing use of peers as wedding officiants: "the large number of interfaith couples; the desire to be married by someone loving and close rather than by an impersonal official; and some couples' conviction that they have less need of the imprimatur of a religious authority and instead draw their sense of community from

their own circle" (2003). It is also due to the easy accessibility and immediate availability of online ordination into religions which require no creedal commitment, such as the Universal Life Church, which the article highlighted as the "oldest and best known instant ministry." Andre Hensley, the church president, told the reporter that 80% of its ministers join to officiate weddings for loved ones, and that the church had ordained over 100,000 new ministers in the prior year alone.

The *New York Times* story was not news, exactly. National newspapers and magazines had covered evolving wedding trends towards greater personalization, secularization, and de-traditionalization for decades, and several stories had already related these developments to the growth of easy ordinations provided by the Universal Life Church (Curtis, 1970; Price, 1993; Watkins, 2002). Since the heyday of the 1960s counterculture, couples have progressively rejected cookie-cutter weddings in favor of "individual expression, personal authority, and cultural reinterpretation" of traditional wedding forms and expectations (Dunak, 2013: 6). Self-expression, personal fulfillment, and authenticity replaced conventionalism, just as egalitarianism displaced patriarchal standards for married life and emerging spiritualities challenged established religions (Seligson, 1973; Wallace, 2004; Mead, 2007; Dunak, 2013). Couples sought outdoor weddings or locations specially connected to their lives, alternative religious texts or personally meaningful

* University of California, Santa Barbara, U.S.A
hoesly@umail.ucsb.edu

secular readings, and informality and intimacy instead of rigid rules of etiquette. Rather than reflecting the views of one's parents or other traditional authority figures, couples centered their "new weddings" or "alternative weddings" on themselves; their personal preferences became paramount.

The Universal Life Church (ULC), founded in 1959, created a new avenue for couples to celebrate their weddings their way, beholden only to their own mutual nuptial desires. It has ordained over 20 million people since 1962, when it began offering free ordinations for life, no questions asked, first via mail order and later online.¹ While people have joined the church for a variety of reasons over its history, it is primarily known today for ordaining ministers to perform personalized weddings for friends and family. The ULC is one of the largest religions in the United States, yet it has escaped scholarly attention.² To date, there has been no focused study of the ULC or any survey of its members or the people who use their services. This article explores the motivations of people who get ordained by the ULC or seek a ULC minister for their wedding, the self-identifications of ULC ministers and couples wed by them, and their respective descriptions and labeling of their ULC-connected weddings. For the purposes of this article, particular focus is given to respondents who claim no religious affiliation or identification.

Background

A Brief History of the Universal Life Church

The Universal Life Church began simply as Life Church in 1959 in Modesto, California at the home of its founder, Kirby J. Hensley. According to his official biography, *The Modesto Messiah*, Hensley was born in Lowgap, North Carolina in 1911 into a Baptist family and remained illiterate his entire life (Ashmore, 1977). As a young teenager he was ordained a Baptist minister. He preached itinerantly for several years before becoming a church planter in Oklahoma and California for the Assemblies of God. Despite his charisma, he could not maintain a regular congregation for long, due in part to his idiosyncratic teachings, which included making statements such as "You are God" and the "Bible is the biggest hindrance to mankind today" as he beat his chest or grinned (14–15). To escape the strictures of denominational orthodoxy permanently, Hensley founded a church that would "make it possible for *anybody* to be ordained . . . No matter *what* he believes" (21). In 1962, he incorporated his church as the Universal Life Church. It had no doctrine except to believe "*that which is right . . . and every person has the right to decide what is right for himself*" (24). The ULC became a home for metaphysical people, Christians who felt called to ministry but who rejected traditional seminary training, and followers of all manner of countercultural beliefs and practices, including atheists.³

Aside from advocating for individual conscience vis-à-vis religious regulations of beliefs and behaviors, Hensley's church also fought to protect religious liberty from state regulation. "We don't stand between *you* and your *God*, but between *you* and the *State*. The purpose

of the Church is to bring *absolute Freedom of Religion to all people*," he told an audience at Sonoma State College in 1969 (52). When the IRS refused to recognize the ULC as a religion or to grant it tax-exempt status in 1969, the church sued. News coverage in *Time* magazine and in major national newspapers that year spurred rapid growth. By 1971, the church had ordained over 1 million ministers. In 1974, a federal judge declared that the ULC is a religion deserving tax exemption.⁴ The ULC sought to act as a "buffer zone," protecting individual religious expression from the encroachments of either church or state (Hensley, 1986).

According to media accounts, people became ministers in order to dodge the Vietnam War draft, earn honorary degrees and credentials, avoid paying taxes on property and income, and to perform unconventional weddings, among other reasons. Within the church, however, monthly or quarterly newsletters reveal a rich variety of religious and spiritual attitudes and activities, from weekly sermons and annual conventions to member-written theological reflections on current events and spiritual advice about personal matters. New course offerings and church publications were advertised alongside updates on lawsuits involving the church and articles about church-state issues generally. Newsletters and Hensley's stand-alone publications featured his evolving theological, political, and social concerns. As Hensley, the ULC, and affiliated churches chartered under its auspices appeared to promote tax avoidance in ULC periodicals, the IRS withdrew its tax exempt status in 1984. The meaning of the ULC seemed to be in the eye of the beholder; some saw it as a fraud while others saw it as a new spiritual community.⁵ Regardless of one's view, over 12 million had joined by 1984. Over the next decade, the church continued to grow even as it battled with the IRS in the courts.

In 1995, the ULC went online under a then-subsidary organization, the Universal Life Church Monastery (ULC Monastery). The ease of online ordination coupled with a flurry of news coverage about journalists getting ordained, non-traditional and celebrity weddings officiated by ULC ministers, and generic reports about web-based religions in the new millennium helped surge ULC membership rolls. After Kirby Hensley died in 1999, the ULC settled its litigation with the IRS and his wife Lida Hensley took over until her death in 2006, when their son Andre became president. Between Kirby and Lida's deaths, the IRS litigation, and issues related to leadership succession at the ULC Monastery, ULC headquarters did not maintain control over its websites.⁶ During the mid-aughts, several new affiliated and/or competing sects arose online bearing the name Universal Life Church, including the Universal Life Church Seminary, Universal Life Church Online, and the newly reorganized Universal Life Church Monastery, now based in Seattle and no longer affiliated with the original ULC. For the purposes of this study, I use the name Universal Life Church or ULC to refer to the original Universal Life Church based in Modesto, California as well as its official affiliates, unauthorized spin-offs, and related organizations using the ULC name. When referring to a

particular ULC organization, I will use the full name of that particular church.⁷

Relevant Religious and Social Trends since the 1960s

Since the 1960s, scholars of religion in the U.S. have observed a growing trend towards individualistic, improvised, and eclectic forms of reflexive spirituality alongside an increase in the ratio of survey respondents who claim no religious attendance or affiliation (Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1967; Bellah et al, 1985; Roof & McKinney, 1987; Roof, 1993; Wuthnow, 1998; Roof, 2001). Evidence for secularization includes a mounting distrust of establishment institutional religious authority, decline in liberal mainline congregations, greater religious switching and spiritual seekership, and climbing numbers of atheists and agnostics. Despite the growth of politically active Christian fundamentalism since the late 1970s, or perhaps because of it (Hout & Fischer, 2002; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Hout & Fischer, 2014), the dramatic rise of the “spiritual but not religious” and the “nones” in the 1990s marked a similarly significant cultural shift in American social and religious life (Fuller, 2001; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Chaves, 2011; Pew, 2012). Instead of Baby Boomers driving the national religious culture, increasingly Gen Xers and Millennials have taken the reins and made the U.S. more secular. Nationally, over 18% of Americans reported no religious affiliation in 2010, compared to 7% in 1972 (Pew, 2012: 14).

Younger generations are more secular and less beholden to religious traditions at the very age when they are likely to marry for the first time, resulting in an increased demand for non-religious ceremonies. Millennials and Gen Xers have higher ratios of each age cohort that are religiously unaffiliated: 30% and 21% respectively, compared to 15% for Boomers and less than 10% for the older generations (Pew, 2012). According to Robert Wuthnow, several factors have contributed to the greater secularity and spiritual tinkering of these generations, including delayed first marriage, having fewer children and later in life, looser relationships, higher rates of college education, instant access to information through digital technologies, and globalization (2010). Moreover, many younger “nones” grew up in religiously unaffiliated households and are choosing to stay that way (Pew, 2012: 16). Those raised with no religion tend to marry partners with no religion (Baker & Smith, 2009; Merino, 2012). In 2010, the U.S. median age for first marriage was 29 for men and 27 for women (Cohn et al, 2011). This signals a marked increase in delayed first marriage over time: in 1990, the median ages were 26 and 24, and in 1960 they were 22 and 20. Additionally, most engaged couples have lived together before getting married (Fry & Cohn, 2011; Pleck, 2012). Delayed first marriage, increased premarital cohabitation, greater secularity amongst younger cohorts, and a social climate in which it is more acceptable to be non-religious all combine to generate the demand for non-religious but personally meaningful wedding ceremonies when people do choose to wed.

America’s changing wedding culture reflects these secularizing trends and enables engaged couples to

personalize their weddings. As sociologists Howard Kirschenbaum and Rockwell Stensrud observed about the emergence of the “personal wedding” in the late 1960s and early 1970s, couples are “modifying the old rituals and creating new ones” (1974: 26). Similarly, Karen Dunak argues that while a “desire for community and connection continues to mark wedding celebrations,” the “focus on the desires and identities of the couple and the wedding as a site of personal expression reflect the triumph of the modern focus on the individual in American life” (2013: 181). Like spiritual or secular *bricoleurs*, many couples are planning their ceremonies eclectically, picking and choosing which elements of tradition, innovation, and personal style they want to include. Wedding media have embraced the do-it-yourself trend: a visit to the websites of The Knot, A Practical Wedding, or WeddingWire has become *de rigueur* for middle class brides (175–179). Wedding style guides also tout the DIY trend, often explicitly connecting it to the ULC (Ayers & Brown, 1994: 117–118; Bare, 2007: 180–181; Stallings, 2010: 116; Roney, 2013: 24; cf. Mead, 2007: 138). Personalization is central in contemporary wedding planning. Today’s couples prioritize honesty and authenticity in their lifecycle rituals; non-religious couples are less content to accede to parental wishes for a religious wedding and they prefer to have their officiant be someone they know personally and who reflects their values (Dunak, 2013). Due to increasing social mobility and delayed marriage, friends rather than families have become the primary circle for social intimacy. Rates of weddings officiated by traditional clergy are declining as more couples seek friends or relatives to officiate (Wenner, 2010; Boorstein, 2011; Gootman, 2012). With the ease of online ordination and the proliferation of internet-based religions,⁸ would-be officiants have an array of options from which to choose—and most select the Universal Life Church.

Two other developments have spurred the growth of ULC weddings: an increase in interfaith weddings and the legalization of same-sex marriage. Clergy from many religious denominations generally refuse to perform weddings for mixed-faith couples, let alone secular couples. Despite this, interfaith marriages are increasingly common: 27% of married people are in “religiously mixed marriages,” and when “marriages between people of different Protestant denominational families are included,” the number is 37% (Pew, 2008: 34). Furthermore, “young people are more likely to be in religiously mixed marriages” than older people (34). For many of these couples, finding someone to bless their union can be difficult. Similarly, most religions have condemned homosexuality, excluded same-sex couples, and refused to solemnize same-sex weddings. According to Pew Research Center, 48% of homosexuals are religiously unaffiliated (2013: 90). Due to the history of religious discrimination and same-sex couples’ greater secularity, many same-sex couples want an officiant who comes from an inclusive religion or to have a civil ceremony. Couples facing barriers to finding a willing officiant for their interfaith or same-sex wedding can ask someone to join the ULC and perform

their ceremony in a manner tailored to them (Freedman, 2013; Goffe, 2013; Freedman, 2015; Oppenheimer, 2015).

State Regulation of Marriage and Weddings

In the United States, for the most part, state and county governments regulate marriage by legislating domestic relations and religious incorporation laws as well as specifying which groups count as religions, who qualifies as clergy, which individuals and couples are eligible for marriage, which wedding ceremonies count as legally valid, the rights and responsibilities of married partners, and the terms of marriage dissolution (Cott, 2000). In every state, recognized religious clergy and designated civil officials (such as mayors, judges, and clerks) can officiate weddings. Some states require religious officiants to register with the county clerk prior to performing the ceremony, while others require no registration. Some states specifically stipulate certain religious or secular groups and individuals, such as Native American leaders, Quakers (Religious Society of Friends), Salvation Army captains, and Ethical Culture societies, as also able to perform legally valid ceremonies, while others offer no such stipulations. A few states allow citizens to become deputized for a day in order to perform legally-valid civil marriage ceremonies, and some allow the parties to the marriage to perform the ceremony themselves.⁹ Until recently, same-sex marriages were prohibited by federal and state laws.¹⁰ All couples seeking to marry must abide by state law if they want to obtain the legal benefits of marriage. In most states, then, couples must select either a clergyperson or a civil official to perform their ceremony, as only a few states recognize secular celebrants, humanist officiants, or temporary civil deputies as able to solemnize legally valid weddings.

The legal validity of weddings performed by ULC ministers has been challenged in state courts, sometimes successfully, although most states and counties have never disputed the validity of ULC weddings. Today, ULC ministers are authorized to officiate legally valid weddings in every state except Virginia and North Carolina, where state supreme courts have ruled them invalid as matters of state law, and Pennsylvania and New York, where lower-level state courts and cities have issued divided rulings in different jurisdictions (Rains, 2010; Mazzolli, 2012; Grossman, 2013). The ULC urges its ministers to check applicable county and state marriage laws, and to contact the county clerk in the county in which the marriage will be performed, before officiating wedding ceremonies in order to ensure that they are legally valid. The fact that nearly every jurisdiction in America recognizes ULC weddings makes it attractive to would-be ministers looking to officiate a wedding for a friend or relative. For many non-religious couples who neither want a religious wedding nor an unknown civil servant as their officiant, the ULC provides a ready solution.

Methods

In order to better understand the ULC, its membership, and the couples who utilize the services of its ministers, I conducted mixed-methods research during 2012–2014.

Methods included participant observation, interviews, a survey, and archival research.

At the outset, I should make clear that my informal role as a participant observer began well before I started my formal study of the ULC. In 2000, I became ordained by the ULC as a lark after hearing about it in college. I have since attended several weddings officiated by ULC ministers who were friends of the couples and who became ordained expressly in order to marry them. In 2009, I officiated a wedding for two friends of mine who had asked me to do so, and in 2011 I officiated two more weddings, one for friends and one for a relative. I performed three more weddings for friends in 2012 before formally beginning my research into the ULC. From 2013 to 2014, I officiated four more weddings for friends, totaling ten weddings.¹¹ I was not paid for any of these weddings. For each wedding that I officiated, I took notes about what kind of ceremony the couple wanted, how they met and why they wanted to get married, and what elements they wanted incorporated into and excluded from their ceremony. I also observed the actual ceremony as it took place on their wedding day, including location, size, style of dress, and other related aspects. Nine out of ten couples participated in my research by interviewing with me in 2014. All names used are pseudonyms and I have not included any identifying characteristics.

From November 2013 to May 2014, I distributed an online survey of ULC members and couples married by them through personal chain referral email and Facebook contacts, Universal Life Church Seminary and Universal Life Church Monastery monthly email newsletters and Facebook pages, and eighteen other Facebook pages which used the name "Universal Life Church." Questions covered each respondent's past and current religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs, practices, and self-identifications; reflections on their affiliation with the ULC; knowledge about and characterization of the ULC; descriptions and labeling of ULC weddings in which they have participated; and demographic information. Some questions allowed for an open-ended response. All responses were anonymous. 1,599 people completed the survey. Answers were coded and analyzed for patterns related to respondents' (non-)religious self-identifications, motivations for affiliating with the ULC and characterizations about the church, and (non-)religious characteristics and labeling of ULC wedding ceremonies. At the end of the survey, respondents could opt-in to participate in a follow-up interview by providing their contact information. No compensation was provided to any survey or interview participant.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 62 ULC ministers and 31 couples married by ULC ministers from October 2012 to May 2015. Participants were gathered through chain referral sampling and through the opt-in question at the end of the online survey. As it is not possible to determine what a representative sample of ULC ministers and couples wed by them would be, given the respective ULC churches' lack of demographic data collection, I sought interviewees via purposeful sampling, looking for typical cases as well as significant variants. Most

chain referral participants lived in California, Oregon, and Washington, so most of my interviews occurred in those states. Interviews took place in person, by phone, and online via Skype or GoogleHangouts. All participants have been given pseudonyms. Questions covered the same topics as the survey. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for patterns related to the same themes as the survey.

I also interviewed the president of the Universal Life Church (Andre Hensley), as well as leaders of several ULC-affiliated and spin-off organizations, such as the Universal Life Church Seminary (Amy Long), the Universal Life Church Monastery (George Freeman), and the Universal Life Church Online (Kevin Andrews), among others. These interviews covered the history, activities, and organization of each group, and the leaders' involvement in and thoughts about each church, in addition to the same topics discussed in the other interviews. These interviews were designed to augment the information I gathered from ULC archival sources, newspaper and magazine databases, and court decisions. The original ULC in Modesto, California allowed me to study their church records, newsletters, and publications. Online, I visited ULC websites, subscribed to various ULC email newsletters, followed official and unofficial ULC Facebook pages, and read official and unofficial web-based discussion forums.

Results

Why Join the ULC

The primary reason people become ordained by the ULC today is to officiate weddings for friends or relatives. Leaders of the ULC and the ULC Monastery have estimated that 80% to 90% of their ministers get ordained in order to perform weddings (Lehmann-Haupt, 2003; Sipher, 2007; Personal interview with Andre Hensley, 2014; Personal interview with George Freeman, 2014). This is also the main theme in media accounts of the church over the past twenty years, in the preliminary, everyday conversations I had with people before starting my research, and in the formal interviews I conducted. However, as my survey data make clear, people also join for a host of other reasons unrelated to weddings, such as spiritual development or just for fun. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on those who became ministers so that they could perform wedding ceremonies.

During interviews, I first asked participants what came to their minds when I mentioned the ULC. The most frequent response was to get ordained online in order to officiate a wedding. A typical reply can be seen in Charles and Lucinda's answers to my question. "I think about people having anybody they want marry them, through that church," Charles said. His wife, Lucinda, followed up, "It solved our problem, which is that we wanted to have [our friend] marry us rather than have somebody religious or somebody we didn't know." Couples married by ULC ministers place a premium on knowing their officiant personally and in finding someone who can reflect their particular (non-)religious/spiritual sensibilities on their special day. The church gives them the freedom to choose

whoever they want to solemnize their wedding and the assurance that their ceremony will be legally valid.

Friends and relatives who were asked to officiate a wedding spoke about the ULC in rather utilitarian terms. "The fact of the matter was it was a means to an end," said Albert, who officiated a wedding for college friends. Similarly, Gordon said, "Some friends asked me to marry them and so I went online and said I'd better get ordained to do this." Like most of the ministers I interviewed, Albert and Gordon did not linger long on the ULC website or learn much about the church, other than to verify that their weddings would be legal and that the church did not include teachings with which they disagreed. Their association with the ULC is tangential to their everyday lives, a bit of trivia which becomes useful in the act of preparing and performing a particular wedding for a specific couple. Randy, another ULC minister, said, "Someone asked me to marry them and so for me it was a matter of convenience . . . I don't hang out with other people in order to celebrate or acknowledge the church so it's just a small backdrop in my life."

Another frequent reason people join the ULC is "for a lark" (Billingsley, 2008; Nowicki, 2009). Antonia, who was ordained right after college, explained her reason for joining: "Cuz it was easy to do and fun. [Laughs.] I was like, hey, I could be a minister and I can marry people if I want to. And I am from such an irreligious background that to think that I would be a minister seemed to be absurd and funny and interesting and why the hell not." Others found ordination in the ULC an interesting way to critique religious institutions. Susan, who considers herself spiritual but not religious, said, "In the mid-'80s, I joined because I thought it would be fun, you know to have that. I got such a kick out of them basically thumbing their noses at all the patriarchal structures of all the churches, I just thought it was hilarious. It was . . . very freeing for me." While many people never do anything in particular with their ordination, those who join for fun initially often wind up officiating weddings at a later time. For example, Paul said, "I think it was just that I liked the idea of being ordained. I thought it was funny. I thought it would be fun to do these kind of ceremonies . . . So I got signed up and then I did my friend's wedding" not long afterwards. Although many people join just for fun, ULC ordination can also express a revelry in paradox and irony (e.g., ordained atheists), a person's critique of more traditional religions, and a desire to participate in possible future wedding ceremonies.

Several interviewees, particularly those who became professional wedding officiants, connected ULC ordinations to declining religiosity and desires for more personalized weddings. Paulette, who performed a wedding for friends before becoming a professional officiant, said, "I think a lot of people are going into the internet and signing up because so many people don't have churches that they belong to and so they want to get married and they'll have their friends sign up with ULC so that they'll be able to marry them." As fewer young people affiliate with religious institutions, they are less likely to choose a clergyperson to perform their wedding. They do not want

a traditional religious official to preside over their wedding because they are not religious or because they no longer have a personal relationship with any clergy person. Since couples increasingly desire to celebrate their weddings with people they love and know well, they can ask a friend or relative to get ordained online and officiate their ceremony.

While there are many reasons why people choose to become ULC ministers, the most frequently cited motivation is to officiate a wedding, typically for a loved one. Amongst survey respondents, 78% said that upon joining they liked that they could perform legally valid weddings. Gabe, who has officiated three weddings for friends, said that it is “very empowering to feel that I as an ordinary person can perform recognized religious ritual functions, recognized by the state or my larger community, and that’s something that doesn’t require me to be a spiritual person.” For many people, the ULC offers an opportunity to officiate ceremonies that they would not normally be able to do, since they are not traditional religious clergy with seminary training nor legally-designated civil officials. This opportunity is personally meaningful for ULC ministers, and especially so for those who self-describe as non-religious, who can get ordained easily and perform ceremonies for their loved ones without subscribing to beliefs which run counter to their own convictions.

Still, the results of my survey do not entirely reflect the estimates of ULC leaders, trends in media representations, or the predominant patterns of my interviewees: while officiating weddings was the biggest motivation for people to join the ULC, personal spiritual development was also a key factor in ULC ordinations. According to my survey, 32% of ULC ministers (N = 1,584) joined primarily to officiate the wedding of a friend, relative, or acquaintance, and 1% joined to officiate the wedding of a stranger. An additional 5% joined to begin a wedding officiant business or otherwise enter the wedding industry. Of the 12% of respondents who selected “Other” and then further explained their primary reason for joining the ULC, about half wrote that they wanted to officiate a wedding in the future, to officiate a same-sex wedding, or that they had multiple primary reasons for joining, such as equally desiring to perform weddings as to grow spiritually. Another 8% of ULC ministers joined for the fun of it or as a lark. Meanwhile, 28% joined primarily to “further develop my spiritual or religious journey,” 6% joined in order to start a church or professional ministry, and 4% joined to “deepen my understanding of religion,” showing that for many members the ULC is more than a utilitarian option for those seeking distinctive weddings. For these ministers, the ULC provides a space for personal spiritual exploration in addition to allowing them to perform weddings. It is likely the case that my survey participants—most of whom found it through the Universal Life Church Seminary, ULC Monastery, or other ULC-related groups, indicating that they follow ULC social media and/or subscribe to their monthly newsletters—identify more strongly with the ULC and desire more religious or spiritual community than most ULC members, and thus are less indicative of overall ULC membership.¹²

Self-Identifications of Ministers and Married Couples

Most ULC ministers and couples married by ULC ministers do not describe themselves as religious. Instead, the most frequent self-identifications in interviews and survey responses were “spiritual but not religious,” “seeker,” “humanist,” or simply “not religious” without further elaboration. This reveals a paradoxical fact about the ULC: millions of its ordained ministers say that they are not religious personally, according to their own terms, and at least significant minorities are explicitly atheist, agnostic, or apathetic/indifferent to religion.

Of the ULC ministers who took my survey (N = 1,584), nearly as many describe themselves as “sort of” or “very” religious (45%) as label themselves “not really” or “not at all” religious (42%). Most ULC minister respondents prefer to identify themselves as spiritual (94%), seeker (74%), or humanist (54%). A significant minority consider themselves secular (32%), agnostic (20%), indifferent (20%), or atheist (14%). When looking at the 48% of ULC ministers who have officiated at least one wedding (N = 691), self-identifications become slightly less spiritual (86%) while the other labels remain nearly identical. A marked shift towards decreased religiosity and spirituality, and increased secularity, can be seen when comparing ministers to those individuals who were married by a ULC minister. A majority of individuals married by ULC ministers (N = 207) report that they are not religious (58%). Rates of being spiritual (72%) or seeker (55%) dropped significantly from those of ULC ministers, while rates of self-identifying as humanist (64%), secular (47%), agnostic (37%), apathetic/indifferent (32%), and atheistic (27%) rose by double digits. Across all groups, the younger the participant, the less likely they were to self-describe as religious, spiritual, or seeker, and the more likely they were to claim being secular, humanist, agnostic, atheist, or apathetic/indifferent.

I focus here on the ministers and married couples who self-identify as non-religious across the spectrum; not only is this population a significant proportion of survey respondents, but it is also the dominant self-description of the majority of my interviewees. Participants sometimes classified themselves according to seemingly discrete categories, such as atheist or “spiritual but not religious,” but also in broad, generic terms as “not religious.” For example, Albert, a ULC minister who has officiated two weddings, said, “I don’t have a religion. I’m an atheist and I’m not really interested in having a religion.” Dexter, who officiated one wedding, described leaving religion behind during his first quarter in college: “I rather abruptly became atheist.” Others use social or scholarly categories to label themselves, such as Marlene, who called herself a “spiritual seeker” while insisting that she is not religious during our interview. Just as frequently, participants did not specify any particular term to describe themselves, simply stating that they are not religious. Gordon offered a typical example: “I’m not a religious person, I don’t belong to any denomination, I don’t practice any religion.” This sort of generic non-religiosity, which was not articulated through specific labels such as humanist, atheist, agnostic, secular, spiritual, etc., occurred repeatedly in my interviews.

While many participants used a single discrete or generic category to label themselves, many others asserted several—and at times seemingly contradictory—self-identifications. It was not uncommon to read survey responses or hear interviewees describe themselves as agnostic and spiritual, for example. One survey respondent wrote, “Agnostic humanist. Atheist to all intents and purposes.” Another wrote, “Atheist but spiritual, gaia centered.” One of my interviewees expressed several identifications and influences throughout our interview, ranging from several non-religious terms to spirituality to Asian traditions: “At this point, I’d like to say agnostic . . . I’m an agnostic slash atheist . . . I have strong spiritual feelings . . . I’m not really an atheist but I kinda am . . . I’m a Taoist. If I have to choose an established religion, I’m a Taoist, no doubt . . . My spirituality is defined by *Don Juan*, *Kung Fu*, and the *Tao Te Ching*.” Answers like these trouble our scholarly and sociological categories, affirming the contingency, wild diversity, and paradoxical nature of self-identifications, especially in a formal interview context.

Just as revealing, the interview itself prompted identifications which many participants had not articulated before, or chose not to articulate, particularly for those who do not find religion, spirituality, or irreligion salient in their everyday lives and self-conceptions. Several interviewees stated with conviction that they were not religious, but then struggled to communicate or formulate what self-identification was most resonant for them, often shifting from claiming a general sense of spirituality to disclosing indifference about religion. Shauna, who was married by a ULC minister, said: “I’m definitely not religious. But I would say I’m spiritual. I associate more with, like, the Eastern religions, you know, like Buddhism and . . . I don’t know. I like their tenets more. But yeah, but I don’t like, I’m not very spiritual. I go to yoga . . . I meditate, and I try to like commune with nature and stuff. So I don’t, I guess I just don’t think about it much.” For some respondents, religion or non-religion is not a part of their everyday sense of self. They may be interested in how religion, spirituality, or atheism, for example, operate in the social world, but not in their personal lives as they go about their daily activities.

Others refused to identify themselves in any particular way, other than to affirm that they are not religious. These respondents rejected typical scholarly and cultural labels, preferring to elide neat categories or fixed definitions and identifications. When asked how she would describe herself, Paulette said, “I don’t define myself that way . . . I mean I have a community, a religious community, but I don’t think of myself as religious. I know I’m kind of beating around the bush but I’ve never tried to define myself that way.” Similarly, Antonia said, “I think it depends to whom I’m speaking. Like I generally would say I’m not religious, which to me means I don’t follow any one faith.” After I listed several terms, such as secular, humanist, atheist, agnostic, and apathetic, she replied, “I mean I guess the most interesting there is agnostic to me. But none of those are words I use to define myself.” The act of soliciting self-identifications from research subjects not only prompts context-specific articulations which may or

may not have existed before the interview, but also reveals unease about being placed into particular linguistic or conceptual boxes at all. It is not only a matter of shifting self-identifications over time or in various situations, but also of a purposeful rejection of any stable, unitary, or specific identity or identification.

Labeling and Describing ULC Weddings

ULC ministers and couples married by them describe their wedding ceremonies as personalized, meaningful, and typically non-religious. The vast majority of couples looking to get married asked their friend or relative to officiate their ceremony not because they were members of the ULC, but rather because the close personal relationship was paramount. They wanted someone they knew intimately and who would honor their choices for their ceremony, sharing or affirming their worldview, was comfortable speaking publicly, and perhaps could add a tone of gravitas, solemnity, or humor as befit each particular couple. Civil officials or licensed secular officiants were not acceptable for these couples because no prior relationship existed, just as most traditional religious officials would not match their worldviews. ULC officiants felt honored to be asked to officiate and grateful to be a part of their loved ones’ ceremonies. Some ceremonies included the guests as verbal participants in affirming the couple’s nuptials (“We do!” guests shouted in response to the officiant’s call). ULC weddings often took place outdoors or at locations which were important to the couple, and they ranged from expensive, lavish affairs to affordable, do-it-yourself celebrations. The language of these ceremonies included elements reflective of the couples’ unique personalities and relationship trajectories, and matched their particular, characteristically non-religious, perspectives.

These patterns were found in my survey and in my interviews, and harmonized with the larger trends in American wedding culture described earlier. In my survey, 79% of couples married by ULC ministers (N = 207) reported that they were friends (61%) or relatives (18%) of their ULC officiant. 77% did not consider getting married by a religious leader, and 67% did not consider getting married by a civil official. 71% said their ceremony included no language or readings from religious or spiritual texts. These survey trends largely mirror what I found in my interviews, except all of the couples I interviewed knew their officiant personally as a friend or relative. While most of the weddings used the “traditional” form of a generalized Protestant wedding, including walking down an aisle and exchanging vows and rings, they also innovated by evacuating the ceremony of most metaphysical content and incorporating words unique to their own circumstances and desires. Gordon, who has officiated for nearly thirty couples in thirty years, almost all through personal connections, said, “The people that I’ve married, they’re all secular. None of the people are practicing any religion—that I know of. So they’re doing this because they don’t want it to be a religious ceremony.”

To illustrate with a concrete example, albeit one quite different from most of the ULC weddings I experienced personally, I will describe Rick and Kim’s wedding because

it shows how customized a ULC ceremony can be. Rick calls himself an atheist while Kim says she believes in luck but is not religious. They asked their friend Albert, a declared atheist, to officiate their intentionally secular ceremony, which took place on a city bridge overlooking a river. Albert had introduced the couple to each other after college and they had all remained friends. After their engagement, he joined the ULC in 2006 at their behest. The couple wanted a “more light-hearted and casual affair” rather than a traditional wedding. All three had a theater background and they made the ceremony a performance, writing a script for Albert to read dramatically and incorporating readings from a children’s book with a river theme which they both loved while growing up. Instead of using a photographer, a friend of theirs sketched charcoal drawings during the wedding. Albert and the couple created a ceremony that reflected their particular personalities and secular commitments while honoring the love the couple shared as they dedicated their lives to each other before family and friends.

ULC weddings also offer an avenue for mixing traditions in creating a unique ceremony. For example, one father, a self-described non-religious Jew who says he maintains Jewish spiritual convictions, offered to officiate the wedding of his daughter, who he described as both secular and spiritual, to an agnostic or atheist son-in-law (he was not sure which, he said). They could not find a rabbi who would perform the service, and so he suggested that he get ordained in order to perform the ceremony in a way that respected both the Jewish and the secular backgrounds of the couple. As Samuel explained: “I basically thought, if this is an official way of marrying my daughter, I’m gonna do it and perhaps I can marry other people in the future. But I didn’t want to pretend that I was a member of any organized religion or faith that would have required many years to become a member of. And this happened, you could have done it in about two minutes.” Ordained a year prior to the wedding, he described how his daughter was excited about personalizing her wedding and how they worked together to develop the ceremony’s script, which included Jewish blessings but no Biblical readings. Ultimately, he affirmed, “The reason I joined is because I really wanted to officiate my daughter’s wedding.” Pragmatic considerations regarding the difficulty of obtaining a rabbi suitable to their wedding needs joined relational desires of expressing familial love. Through the ULC, this family had the freedom to construct a ceremony suited to their wishes, blending secular and ethnic-spiritual elements.

While I do not intend for these two examples to represent all or even most ULC weddings in every respect, they do indicate several aspects of how ULC ministers and couples married by them value their weddings. ULC weddings are personalized to each couple, merging traditional and novel, standard and distinctive, elements into a whole which expresses the tastes and sensibilities of the particular couple as they negotiate their desires for their wedding between themselves, and sometimes against or along with their parents’ or grandparents’ wishes. They

had the freedom to create a ceremony that was right for them, without having to stand for religious teachings with which they disagreed or experiencing an unromantic, uniform civil ceremony.¹³ And they could marry wherever they wanted (and could afford), instead of defaulting to a house of worship or government office building. Ministers and couples talked about how meaningful their ceremony was, and how much they appreciated the close connection they had together. Eddie, a ULC minister who officiated a friend’s wedding told me, “I feel honored that people ask, you know, that I am a part of that thought process. To me that means a lot.” Couples, too, express gratitude that a loved one crafted a singular ceremony just for them on their special day.

Discussion

The Universal Life Church provides a window into contemporary social and religious trends as well as scholarly concerns in religious studies and the social scientific study of religion. Sociologists and reporters have observed the “Rise of the Nones,” with *Time* magazine recently declaring it one of the “10 Ideas That Are Changing Your Life,” but there are few accounts of how religiously unaffiliated people celebrate significant lifecycle events (Pew, 2012; Sullivan, 2012). As couples are marrying later in life, they are more secure in their worldviews and less beholden to the traditions of their parents or the religions of their childhoods. In concert, an increasing percentage of couples marrying today want a wedding ceremony that is personalized for them and reflective of their particular worldview, and they are less willing to defer to traditional religious authorities in a church wedding or to civil officials who could perform a secular ceremony in a bureaucratic office building. And with legalization of same-sex marriage, many same-sex couples are seeking officiants who are not connected to traditions that continue discriminatory beliefs and practices, and who will create a customized wedding ceremony that affirms their love and commitment. ULC weddings simultaneously reflect and help catalyze America’s changing wedding culture as it adapts to greater individualization, secularization, and de-traditionalization.

For some critics, these weddings and ordinations undercut the sanctity of marriage and the authority of traditional ministers. Journalists, who have called the ULC the “fast-food version of a ministry” (Lehmann-Haupt, 2003) and “a bit like the McDonald’s of the wedding industry” (Rosenberg, 2011), seem to echo these criticisms. However, as my informants have described, ULC ordinations allow non-religious people to have personalized, meaningful wedding ceremonies that reflect their individual beliefs and family contexts. In addition, the church’s sole credo (“to do that which is right”) reflects an ethic which most of my respondents say they already embrace. Moreover, the ULC provides a forum for the free expression of religion, spirituality, and even explicitly non-religious sentiments—a freedom which these ministers value. Albert, for example, appreciates the ULC’s role in creating space for couples who do not want a traditional religious minister

nor a civil official to perform their wedding. "Almost anyone should be able to have the power to marry people, probably, and sign off on that kind of thing. I think that's what the Universal Life Church has made, a nice kind of thing for freedom in that regard," he said. While the ordination itself is often seen as a matter of convenience and utility by ULC ministers, the weddings they officiate are anything but mass-produced, stock affairs. Instead, the weddings are unique, customized, and constructed on the basis of affective bonds and shared or blended worldviews. The ministers feel honored to have been asked to officiate the weddings of friends and loved ones, and they all find these ceremonies deeply special and set apart from ordinary life and concerns.

The self-identifications of ULC ministers and people married by them confront scholars with a classificatory dilemma. How should researchers identify and generalize about people who slip standard categories, who offer hybrid, fluid, and seemingly paradoxical self-identifications or who refuse the very process of labeling? Such positionalities explode neat categorizations and disrupt dichotomous thinking, giving rise to a litany of terms to describe them, such as seeker, tinkerer, fuzzy, liminal, and in-between (Lim, MacGregor, & Putnam, 2010; Beaman & Beyer, 2013). Religious, spiritual, secular, and non-religious identities are not stable, unitary formations (Chaves, 2010; Hackett, 2014; Lee, 2014). Instead of looking for constancy, we should recognize that "there is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification" (Bayart, 2005: 92). Only through contextualized performances are particular identifications enunciated, and then only contingently and fleetingly. Another day, another place, another interviewer: another self-identification. Terms like religion, spirituality, secularism, and non-religion are discursive, relational constructions contingently articulated in particular locations at specific times for particular purposes (Swatos, 2003: 50; von Stuckrad, 2003; Knott, 2010; von Stuckrad, 2010; Day, 2011; Day, Vincett, & Cotter, 2013; Knott, 2013; von Stuckrad, 2013; Huss, 2014). For this reason, it is helpful to examine my "non-religious" subjects' self-articulations as demarcating a specific positionality within a particular "religion-related field" (Quack, 2014).

Most of the people I interviewed defined themselves and their weddings primarily as "not religious." Other articulations of personal identity and characterizations of ULC weddings came second, typically. "Religion" was perceived as narrow-minded, bigoted, doctrinal, rigid, and dissonant with their values and self-understanding. It was too bound up with the Religious Right and the politicization of religion, as well as an evangelical style of proselytization which respondents found off-putting. "Religious weddings" followed conservative, inflexible scripts which did not reflect the couples' more liberal values or desire for personalization. Moreover, these couples perceived religious weddings as necessarily taking place in a house of worship and led by a minister whom they did not know; instead, they wanted their weddings to take place at a location significant for them and performed by

someone they knew intimately. Similarly, ULC ministers and couples married by them also viewed civil ceremonies negatively, as unromantic, bureaucratic, inflexible, and unfeeling. Some also distanced themselves from labels such as atheist, agnostic, and apathetic/indifferent, perceiving them as too angry/presumptuous, wishy-washy, or negative, respectively. Despite the diversity of non-theistic self-identifications and lifecycle ritualizations, a shared religion-related field shaped the discursive strategies of ULC ministers and ULC-married couples as they formed not only their context-specific identities for an interviewer but also recounted their construction of and desires for their wedding experience.

The ULC challenges popular, legal, and scholarly conceptions of what counts as religion. For many, its ecclesiology seems too atomized and its ordination process too free and easy, even as it echoes long-held and widespread Protestant beliefs about the "priesthood of all believers." Its doctrine seems too minimal and simplistic, even as it reiterates the same "golden rule" which perennialists claim lies at the heart of all religions. I make these points not to defend the church or to argue for its status as a *bona fide* religion, but rather to question why the ULC, which has ordained over 20 million ministers in over 50 years, has eluded scholarly attention. Perhaps it is a problem of perceived inauthenticity. Concerns regarding the sincerity of the ULC's mission and its ministers' involvement have circulated around the church for decades. Press accounts have portrayed it as humorous and legally dubious even as they publicize it. While a federal judge and most states have ruled that it is a religion and recognize marriages solemnized by its ministers, some states have ruled against the church, based on the purportedly inauthentic, non-traditional nature of its ecclesiology, polity, and teachings. The ULC is a largely legally-recognized religion mostly filled with non-religious ministers, many of whom perform non-religious weddings for non-religious couples. And yet for many, it is a spiritual home, providing online forums for discussing metaphysical matters, offering correspondence courses about religious topics, and allowing for the credentialed practice of religious or spiritual leadership according to each minister's personal beliefs and values. The church provides a canopy for individualized, autonomous beliefs and practices. Its promotion of and permission for independence from ecclesial and state authority counters hegemonic understandings of religion.

Several scholars have noted the co-dependency, mutual imbrication, or even complete blurring of religion and secularism (e.g., McCutcheon, 2007; Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2008; Knott, 2013). The ULC is a prime case study for the co-constitution of religious and secular, especially in the case of weddings performed by ULC ministers. Self-described non-religious couples who want a non-religious friend to officiate their non-religious ceremony will often ask that friend to become an ordained minister in a legally-recognized church, the ULC. The fact that the ULC is a recognized religion in most jurisdictions and that county clerks process weddings officiated by its ministers

is crucial to these couples and their ULC-ordained officiants; otherwise, the weddings would not be legally valid. On the marriage license, the officiant must mark “religious” rather than “civil” to identify what type of ceremony it was; by law, civil ceremonies can only be conducted by specified civil officials, and not religious ministers. For these reasons, ULC weddings are religious ceremonies, even if all involved in the celebration perceive them as non-religious; similarly, the self-described non-religious officiants are not only recognized by the ULC as religious clergy but also as such by the state. In this way, secular law forms intentionally non-religious weddings into religious occasions, and a religious institution ordains self-described non-religious people as religious officials. If the wedding was religious, the couple would not select this avenue for their nuptials; if the wedding was secular, the state would not recognize it as legitimate. For these couples and their officiants, the ULC is a “religion of convenience,” as one interviewee called it, a pragmatic “cultural resource” (Swidler, 1986; Beckford, 1999) which allows non-religious individuals and couples to create personalized weddings suited to their needs as they declare their love and commitment before their gathered communities.

Conclusion

The membership of the ULC is more diverse than what I have presented here; however, for this paper, I have chosen to focus on those who describe themselves as variously non-religious, who make up a majority of ULC ministers and couples married by them. My examination of ULC membership and weddings reveals not only the diversity of non-theistic self-identification and lifecycle ritualization, but also how constructs such as “religious” and “secular” can be co-constitutive rather than purely oppositional. Ultimately, the ULC is religious and non-religious simultaneously, and its categorization as one or the other perhaps reveals more about the observer’s disposition or predilections than the object(s) under study.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

¹ 20 million ministers is a conservative number. Journalists have cited the 20 million number since at least 2003 (Barker, 2003; de Vise, 2006). Based on the number of people ordained each month by the ULC and the separate Universal Life Church Monastery (ULC Monastery), extrapolated over the years since 2006, the total number of ordained ministers is likely more than 23 million today, with most of the growth coming from the ULC Monastery (Personal interview with Andre Hensley, 21 November 2014; Personal interview with George Freeman, 8 December 2014). The total number could even be much higher since, according to Religion News Service, the ULC Monastery is growing at 10% to 15% per year (Adams, 2015). Ordination into both the ULC and the ULC Monastery has always been free. Today, ministers receive an email confirming

their ordination. If new ministers desire a printed ordination certificate, wallet ID card, or other products, though, they must pay for those items.

² There is a paucity of scholarly work about the ULC. Most of what exists is a short reference to the church in an article or book about another group or topic (e.g., Chidester, 2001: 544; Cowan and Hadden, 2004: 127–128; Chidester, 2005: 199) or a brief mention of the ULC as an illustration of some other larger issue (Introvigne, 1999: 66–67). Some encyclopedias of American religious movements include an entry on the ULC (Melton, 1978: 459–460; Miller, 1995: 432; Chryssides, 2006: 337–338). Beyond this, there are many articles in law and tax journals which refer to tax cases involving the ULC and/or its charter churches.

³ Hensley ordained the famed founder of American Atheists, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, around 1970. She then created Poor Richard’s Universal Life Church in Austin, Texas and earned honorary divinity degrees from the ULC (Ashmore, 1977: 39; LeBeau, 2003: 148–150).

⁴ *Universal Life Church v. United States*, 372 F.Supp. 770 (E.D.Cal. 1974).

⁵ Douglas Cowan and Jeffrey Hadden argue, “Lest readers too quickly dismiss the ULC as simply a transparent religious scam,” ULC charter churches are “serious about their claims, their intent, [and] their belief that the ULC has conferred a measure of legitimacy upon their endeavors” (2004: 128). Jonathan Z. Smith, on the other hand, is less sanguine, accepting uncritically the IRS’ framing of the ULC: “. . . the Internal Revenue Service is reluctant, in most cases, to adjudicate the claims of religious organizations, except those it judges to be extraordinarily or patently fraudulent (for example, mail order ministries such as the Universal Life Church, founded in 1962)” (2004: 377).

⁶ The ULC headquarters website, www.ulchq.com, has not been updated since 2007. The ULC Monastery, which reorganized under new leadership and disaffiliated from the original ULC in 2006, owns most of the internet real estate connected to online searches for topics such as “Universal Life Church,” “online ordination,” and “get ordained online.” The ULC Monastery can be found at www.ulc.org, www.themonastery.org, and www.getordained.org, in addition to hundreds of other sites and domain names it owns.

⁷ In addition, spin-offs of spin-offs have emerged, such as the Universal Life Church World Headquarters (now called Universal One Church), American Marriage Ministries, and Open Ministry, all of which were founded by former ULC Monastery members and employees after the ULC Monastery’s split from the original ULC in 2006.

⁸ Other web-based religions offering online ordination include The Church of Spiritual Humanism, Rose Ministries, American Fellowship Church, First Nation Church & Ministry, The Church of the Latter-Day Dude, United Church of Bacon, Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and more.

- ⁹ For example, California and Alaska offer deputy-for-a-day and marriage commissioner programs, respectively, while Colorado permits couples to marry themselves.
- ¹⁰ In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to offer same-sex marriages. The United States Supreme Court has since struck down a federal law, the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), defining marriage as between one man and one woman, as unconstitutional (*United States v. Windsor*, 2013) as well as finding unconstitutional state laws prohibiting same-sex marriages (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015).
- ¹¹ For full disclosure, I also began a wedding officiant business in Santa Barbara, California in 2012 and have since officiated over 40 additional weddings in that capacity. No data from those weddings is included in my research, however, because I opted not to solicit those couples' consent to participate in my study and because I was paid for officiating their weddings. My research question primarily focuses on couples who consciously select someone they know to officiate their ceremony as a ULC minister, rather than couples who select an officiant-for-hire who is otherwise a stranger and who just happens to be ordained by the ULC. While this is an interesting population and a phenomenon worthy of further study, it is not the focus of this article.
- ¹² The ULC Monastery had about 200,000 email newsletter subscribers and the Universal Life Church Seminary about 46,000 subscribers during the period of my survey (Email communications, 2015). The total number of people who followed or "liked" various ULC groups on Facebook was less than 82,000 altogether. Newsletter subscribers and social media followers constitute a relatively small percentage of the total number of ULC ministers, and one which is notably more engaged with the ULC than the tens of millions who do not maintain any continued connection with it beyond the date of their ordination.
- ¹³ Of course there are many liberal religions, such as Unitarian Universalism, which are inclusive and offer weddings suitable to secular and non-religious couples, and there are many civil servants who will officiate ceremonies in a location and style of the couple's choosing. The couples I interviewed either did not know about these possibilities or, more typically, rejected them out of hand as incommensurate with their desire to have an officiant with whom they enjoyed a close relationship.

References

- Adams, H.** 2015 "Online ordinations aren't just for weddings anymore." *Washington Post*, 13 January.
- Ashmore, L.** 1977 *The Modesto messiah: The sensational story of Kirby J. Hensley, the famous mail-order minister*. Bakersfield, CA: Universal Press.
- Ayers, T., & Brown, P.** 1994 *The essential guide to lesbian and gay weddings*. San Francisco, CA: Harper-SanFrancisco.
- Baker, J. O., & Smith, B. G.** 2009 "The nones: Social characteristics of the religiously unaffiliated." *Social Forces*, 87.3, 1251–1263. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0181>
- Bare, K.** 2007 *The DIY wedding: Celebrate your day your way*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Barker, O.** 2003 "Need someone to officiate the 'I do'? A pal might do." *USA Today*, 3 January.
- Bayart, J.-F.** 2005 *The illusion of cultural identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Beaman, L. G., & Beyer, P.** 2013 "Betwixt and between: A Canadian perspective on the challenges of researching the spiritual but not religious." In A. Day, G. Vincett, & C. R. Cotter (Eds.) *Social identities between the sacred and the secular*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, pp. 127–142.
- Beckford, J. A.** 1999 "The politics of defining religion in secular society: From a taken-for-granted institution to a contested resource." In J. G. Platvoet & A. L. Molendijk (Eds.) *The pragmatics of defining religion: Contexts, concepts, and contests*. Boston, MA: Brill, pp. 23–40.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M.** 1985 *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Berger, P. L.** 1967 *The sacred canopy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Billingsley, E.** 2008 "Universal life church ordinations give flexibility as well as credibility." *Albuquerque Journal*, 14 September.
- Boorstein, M.** 2011 "Personalizing nuptials to make them their own." *Washington Post*, 18 September.
- Chaves, M.** 2010 "Rain dances in the dry season: Overcoming the religious congruence fallacy." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49.1, 1–14. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01489.x>
- Chaves, M.** 2011 *American religion: Contemporary trends*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9781400839957>
- Chidester, D.** 2001 *Christianity: A global history*. New York: HarperOne.
- Chidester, D.** 2005 *Authentic fakes: Religion and American popular culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. PMID: 15967793.
- Chryssides, G. D.** 2006 *The A to Z of new religious movements*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Cohn, D., Passel, J. S., Wang, W., & Livingston, G.** 2011 "Barely half of U.S. adults are married – A record low." Pew Research Center. Available from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low/>
- Cowan, D. E., & Hadden, J. K.** 2004 "Virtually religious: New religious movements and the world wide web." In J. R. Lewis (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of new religious movements*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 119–140.
- Curtis, C.** 1970 "'Dearly beloved,' the clergyman used to intone, but today?" *New York Times*, 8 November.
- Day, A.** 2011 *Believing in belonging: Belief and social identity in the modern world*. New York: Oxford

- University Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577873.001.0001>
- Day, A., Vincett, G., & Cotter, C. R.** (Eds.) 2013 *Social identities between the sacred and the secular*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- de Vise, D.** 2006 "More couples choose to wed their way." *Washington Post*, 2 July.
- Dunak, K. M.** 2013 *As long as we both shall love: The white wedding in postwar America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Freedman, S. G.** 2013 "For interfaith gay couples, just one obstacle is cleared." *New York Times*, 1 November.
- Freedman, S. G.** 2015 "Couples personalizing role of religion in wedding ceremonies." *New York Times*, 26 June.
- Fry, R., & Cohn, D.** 2011 "Living together: The economics of cohabitation." Pew Research Center. Available from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/06/pew-social-trends-cohabitation-06-2011.pdf>
- Fuller, R. C.** 2001 *Spiritual but not religious: Understanding unchurched America*. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195146808.001.0001>
- Goffe, W. S.** 2013 "The next same-sex marriage battle: Who will officiate?" *Forbes*, 3 January. Available from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahljacobs/2013/01/03/the-next-same-sex-marriage-battle-who-will-officiate/>.
- Gootman, E.** 2012 "The officiant among us." *New York Times*, 9 March.
- Grossman, J. L.** 2013 "A difference of opinion: Are Universal Life Church weddings valid in New York?" Available from <https://verdict.justia.com/2013/05/14/a-difference-of-opinion>.
- Hackett, C.** 2014 "Seven things to consider when measuring religious identity." *Religion*, 44.3, 396–413.
- Hensley, K. J.** 1986 *The buffer zone*. Modesto, CA: Universal Life Church, Inc.
- Hout, M., & Fischer, C. S.** 2002 "Why more Americans have no religious preference: politics and generations." *American Sociological Review*, 67, 165–190.
- Hout, M., & Fischer, C. S.** 2014 "Explaining why more Americans have no religious preference: Political backlash and generational succession, 1987–2012." *Sociological Science*, 14.4, 423–447.
- Huss, B.** 2014 "Spirituality: The emergence of a new cultural category and its challenge to the religious and the secular." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29.1, 47–60.
- Introvigne, M.** 1999 "Religion as claim: Social and legal controversies." In J. G. Platvoet & A. L. Molendijk (Eds.) *The pragmatics of defining religion: Contexts, concepts, and contests*. Boston, MA: Brill, pp. 41–72.
- Jakobsen, J. R., & Pellegrini, A.** (Eds.) 2008 *Secularisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kirschenbaum, H., & Stensrud, R.** 1974 *The wedding book: Alternative ways to celebrate marriage*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Knott, K.** 2010 "Theoretical and methodological resources for breaking open the secular and exploring the boundary between religion and non-religion." *Historia Religionum*, 2, 115–133.
- Knott, K.** 2013 "The secular sacred: In between or both/and?" In A. Day, G. Vincett & C. R. Cotter (Eds.) *Social identities between the sacred and the secular*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, pp. 145–160.
- Kosmin, B. A., & Keysar, A.** 2009 "American nones: The profile of the no religion population." Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture.
- LeBeau, B. F.** 2003 *The atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lee, L.** 2014 "Secular or nonreligious? Investigating and interpreting generic 'not religious' categories and populations." *Religion*, 44.3, 466–482. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2014.904035>
- Lehmann-Haupt, R.** 2003 "Need a minister? How about your brother?" *New York Times*, 12 January.
- Luckmann, T.** 1967 *The invisible religion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Mallozzi, V. M.** 2012 "Reconsidering the rev. best friend" *New York Times*, 16 November.
- McCutcheon, R. T.** 2007 "They licked the platter clean: On the co-dependency of the religious and the secular." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 19, 173–199. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157006807x240109>; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157006807794757494>
- Mead, R.** 2007 *One perfect day: The selling of the American wedding*. New York: Penguin.
- Melton, J. G.** (Ed.) 1978 *The encyclopedia of American religions (Volume 2)*. Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Company.
- Merino, S. M.** 2012 "Irreligious socialization? The adult religious preferences of individuals raised with no religion." *Secularism & Nonreligion*, 1, 1–16. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.aa>
- Miller, T.** (Ed.) 1995 *America's alternative religions*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nowicki, S.** 2009 "Ordination not a 'lark' for all ULC ministers." *Modesto Bee*, 7 March.
- Oppenheimer, M.** 2015 "Gay marriage prompts call for clergy to shun civil ceremonies." *New York Times*, 2 January.
- Pew.** 2008 "U.S. religious landscape survey: Religious affiliation: Diverse and dynamic." Washington, D.C. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.
- Pew.** 2012 "'Nones' on the rise: One-in-five adults have no religious affiliation." Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.
- Pew.** 2013 "A survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, experiences and values in changing times." Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.
- Pleck, E. H.** 2012 *Not just roommates: Cohabitation after the sexual revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226671055.001.0001>. PMID: 23284271; PMCID: PMC3532897.
- Price, R.** 1993 "Couples leaving church out in search for 'fun' weddings," *USA Today*, 30 August.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E.** 2010 *American grace: How religion divides and unites us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

- Quack, J.** 2014 "Outline of a relational approach to 'nonreligion.'" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26, 439–469. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341327>
- Rains, R. E.** 2010 "Marriage in the time of internet ministers: I now pronounce you married, but who am I to do so?" *Journal of Internet Law*, 14.4, 1, 11–25.
- Roney, C.** 2013 *The Knot guide to wedding vows and traditions: readings, rituals, music, dances, and toasts (Revised and updated)*. New York: Clarkson Potter.
- Roof, W. C.** 1993 *A generation of seekers: The spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins.
- Roof, W. C.** 2001 *Spiritual marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Roof, W. C., & McKinney, W.** 1987 *American mainline religion: Its changing shape and future*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rosenberg, N.** 2011 "Something about me makes people want to marry." *New York Times*, 7 January. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9781400823086>
- Seligson, M.** 1973 *The eternal bliss machine: America's way of wedding*. New York: William Morrow.
- Sipher, D.** 2007 "Great wedding! But was it legal?" *New York Times*, 5 August.
- Smith, J. Z.** 2004 "God save this honorable court: Religion and civic discourse." In *Relating religion: Essays in the study of religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 375–390. PMCid: PMC509342.
- Stallings, A. M.** 2010 *Offbeat bride: creative alternatives for independent brides*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- Sullivan, A.** 2012 "The Rise of the Nones." *Time*, 12 March, p. 68.
- Swatos, Jr., W. H.** 2003 "Differentiating experiences: The virtue of substantive definitions." In A. L. Greil & D. G. Bromley (Eds.) *Defining religion: Investigating the boundaries between the sacred and the secular*. Boston, MA: JAI/Elsevier, pp. 39–53. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1061-5210\(03\)10003-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1061-5210(03)10003-5)
- Swidler, A.** 1986 "Culture in action: Symbols and strategies." *American Sociological Review*, 15.2, 273–286. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2095521>
- von Stuckrad, K.** 2003 "Discursive study of religion: From states of the mind to communication and action." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 15, 255–271. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157006803322393387>
- von Stuckrad, K.** 2010 "Reflections on the limits of reflection: An invitation to the discursive study of religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 22, 156–169. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157006810X512347>
- von Stuckrad, K.** 2013 "Discursive study of religion: Approaches, definitions, implications." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 25, 5–25. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341253>
- Wallace, C. M.** 2004 *All dressed in white: The irresistible rise of the American wedding*. New York: Penguin.
- Watkins, W.** 2002 "Something bold, something you: Couples say 'we do' to unconventional weddings," *Washington Post*, 30 September.
- Wenner, R.** 2010 "More couples have friends perform wedding." *NPR*, 27 June.
- Wuthnow, R.** 1998 *After heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520213968.001.0001>
- Wuthnow, R.** 2010 *After the baby-boomers: How twenty-and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

How to cite this article: Hoesly, D 2015 "'Need a Minister? How About Your Brother?': The Universal Life Church between Religion and Non-Religion". *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 4: 12, pp. 1–13, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.be>

Published: 23 October 2015

Copyright: © 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

]u[*Secularism and Nonreligion* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 