

Dusty Hoesly

Your Wedding, Your Way: Personalized, Nonreligious Weddings through the Universal Life Church

1 Introduction: The Growth of Personalized, Nonreligious Weddings

Wedding ceremonies in the United States are increasingly personalized and non-religious, a trend facilitated in part by the Universal Life Church (ULC), which will ordain anyone nearly instantly. While it does not identify as a secular or non-believer organization, the ULC provides a popular pathway for self-described nonreligious couples to achieve a unique wedding that honors their beliefs and relationships. As a church, its ministers are capable of solemnizing marriages legally; and as a religion that allows anyone to become a minister, it permits secular people to perform legally valid weddings. Although civil ceremonies are secular, they are not often customized for specific couples. Secular celebrants who are certified by nonbeliever organizations are few and far between, and in most states their weddings are not recognized legally. Given that nonbeliever organizations have not prioritized secular alternatives to religious rites of passage, nonreligious couples find alternatives that facilitate such rituals, even paradoxically yet pragmatically by utilizing a religious resource such as the ULC. The ULC thus complicates notions of “organized secularism” because it shows how many avowedly secular people take up a strategic religious identity in order to achieve a desired nonreligious ritual in an individualized manner.

The rise of nonreligious weddings in the 21st century tracks with several developments in American society and technology, particularly the rise of the “nones” and widespread use of the internet. Since 1990, more Americans have declared that they have no religious affiliation, rising from 8% in 1990 to 21% in 2014, according to the General Social Survey (Hout and Smith 2015, 1). A 2014 Pew survey claims that 23% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated (2015, 3). Younger cohorts are more likely to be unaffiliated, with 33% of those aged 18–24 claiming no religious affiliation (Hout and Smith 2015, 3). During this same time, the rates of Americans who earn bachelor’s and graduate degrees, engage in premarital sex, cohabit before marriage, delay marriage and childbirth, and forego marriage entirely have increased. In 2010, the median age for first marriage was 29 for men and 27 for women, up from 26 and 24 in

1990 (Cohn et al. 2011). As newer generations get married, they want their weddings to reflect their increasing secularity. Those with no religion tend to marry partners also with no religion (Baker and Smith 2015, 163–164; Merino 2012, 8). Alongside these trends, the growth of the internet as a site for exchanging and marketing wedding concepts and vendors has changed how Americans marry. The development of wedding websites and blogs, such as The Knot, A Practical Wedding, and Offbeat Bride, has steered middle class tastes regarding wedding fashions and DIY alternatives. The internet has also made it easy for people to become ministers in religions that allow near-instant ordination online.¹ The primary institution offering such ordinations is the ULC, which has ordained nearly 23 million people since 1962 by mail and online.

Rates of weddings performed by conventional clergy have declined as couples opt instead for friends or relatives who get ordained online or else hire professional wedding officiants, an emerging industry in the 21st century (Gootman 2012).² According to The Knot's 2009 survey of its members, 29% of member couples were married by a friend or relative; by 2015, that number jumped to 40% (Sun 2016). The Wedding Report similarly shows that the ratio of weddings performed by friends or relatives (from 10% in 2008 to 17% in 2012), or by professional officiants who advertise as wedding vendors (from 13% in 2008 to 17% in 2012), is growing (McMurray 2012, 2–3). Simultaneously, the ratio of weddings performed by priests (27% in 2008 but 18% in 2012) and by pastors, ministers, and rabbis (43% in 2008 but 39% in 2012) is declining, while the proportion of civil ceremonies has remained steady (about 6%) (2–3).³ Despite the statistical variations between The Knot and The Wedding Report, both show a clear and fast-growing trend toward friends and relatives officiating weddings rather than traditional clergy. Nonreligious people increasingly want a personalized ceremony that reflects their values, led by someone they know. Most of the indi-

1 Internet-based religions offering near-instant online ordination, usually for free, include American Marriage Ministries, Open Ministry, Universal One Church, Church of Spiritual Humanism, Rose Ministries, American Fellowship Church, First Nation Church & Ministry, Church of the Latter-Day Dude, United Church of Bacon, Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and more, in addition to the Universal Life Church.

2 The New York City Clerk's office "processed 1,105 marriage licenses last year for ceremonies officiated by Universal Life ministers, a small fraction of the total, but more than twice as many as in 2009" (Gootman 2012).

3 There are almost no government or academic surveys of how people marry or of the numbers or ratios of civil to religious wedding ceremonies. Counties and states rarely input data regarding whether marriages were civil or religious into state records databases, although that information is marked by officiants on individual marriage licenses in most jurisdictions. Rates of civil ceremonies likely climbed after the nation-wide legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015.

viduals ordained online for this purpose receive their ministerial license through the ULC.

American weddings have become more individually-centered, alternatively spiritual, and overtly secular since the 1960s, as couples have sought alternatives to traditional religious rituals. This personalization and detraditionalization of American weddings is linked to the ULC, which began as a mail-order ministry. News media (Curtis 1970; Gootman 2012; Lehmann-Haupt 2003; Price 1993), wedding guidebooks (Ayers and Brown 1994, 117–118; Bare 2007, 180–181; Francesca 2014, 22–24; Roney 1998, 78, 98; Roney 2013, 24; Stallings 2010, 116; Toussaint and Leo 2004, 39), and scholars (Dunak 2013, 80; Mead 2007, 138, 161) have explicitly cited the ULC as part of the growth of personalized weddings. Same-sex couples, now legally permitted to marry across the U.S., typically want nonreligious weddings, with many led by ULC ministers (Freedman 2015). These sources report that couples seeking nontraditional and nonreligious weddings often ask a friend or relative to officiate for them, using the ULC as a way to ensure their marriages' legality while reflecting their choices for how they want to celebrate their special day.

This chapter explores how nonreligious couples celebrate their weddings using the ULC as a case study, and how ULC weddings complicate simplistic secular-religious binaries. Since nonbeliever organizations, as well as most religious organizations and civil officiants, are unable to meet the demand for personalized, nonreligious weddings, nonreligious couples seek alternatives such as the ULC. The ULC is a religious institution that will ordain nonreligious people, who can then officiate personalized, nonreligious, and legally-valid weddings. In order to be recognized by the state, a secular or “spiritual but not religious” friend who officiates a ceremony is counted as a religious minister, and the non-religious ceremony is counted as a religious one, even though all of the parties to the wedding understand it and themselves to be thoroughly nonreligious. According to my original survey and interview data, most ULC ministers and the couples who engage them self-describe as nonreligious, typically as “spiritual but not religious” but also as humanist, secular, agnostic, and atheist. Similarly, they describe their weddings as nonreligious, consciously excluding traditional religious language and locations. Examining ULC weddings thus reveals not only the diversity of nontheistic self-identification and lifecycle ritualization, but also the interpenetration and co-constitution of religious and secular categories. The ULC, its ministers, and its weddings blur the presumed boundary between religious and secular, showing their constant entanglement.

In next four sections, I discuss my research methods, the history of American wedding personalization and secularization, secular options for nuptial celebration, and the ULC's history particularly as it relates to weddings. I then analyze a

sample ULC wedding (section 6) before placing it in the context of general ULC wedding trends (section 7). Finally, I conclude by examining further how ULC weddings, in instantiating a sort of “secular sacred,” demonstrate the mutual entanglement of the religious and the secular.

2 Methodology

In order to investigate how nonreligious couples marry through the ULC, I conducted mixed-methods research including participant observation, interviews, a survey, and archival research.⁴ I was ordained by the ULC in 2000 while I was a college undergraduate; I had heard about it from classmates and thought it would be fun to become a titular minister. I did nothing with my ordination until 2009 when two friends asked me to officiate their wedding. Over the next six years I officiated twelve more weddings for friends and relatives: two in 2011, three in 2012, two in 2013, two in 2014, and three in 2015.⁵ Weddings took place in California, Oregon, Washington, Louisiana, Connecticut, and England. For each wedding, I took notes about what kind of ceremony the couple wanted, where it took place, what kind of language and rituals they wanted included and excluded, how they met and fell in love, why they wanted to get married, and what compromises (if any) the couple made amongst each other and with their parents or other family members who expressed preferences for the ceremony. All but one of the couples agreed to interview with me about their wedding for my research, and all names and identifying characteristics are anonymized.

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, ULC Seminary and ULC Monastery monthly email newsletters and Facebook pages, and eighteen other Facebook pages which used the

⁴ Parts of this methodology section repeat descriptions from an earlier publication (Hoesly 2015).

⁵ For full disclosure, I also began a wedding officiant business in Santa Barbara, California in 2012 and have since officiated over 80 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 chapter.

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 (Patton 2002, 230–242).⁶ 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 Google Hangouts. 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 Monastery (George Freeman), the Universal Life Church Seminary (Amy Long), and the Universal Life Church Online (Kevin Andrews), among others. These interviews covered the history, activities,

⁶ Typical case sampling is one kind of purposive/purposeful (nonprobability) sampling. In typical case sampling, the researcher looks for themes that recur frequently or that are not extreme or unusual. These cannot be used to make generalized statements about the experiences of all participants, but rather are illustrative. Other kinds of purposeful sampling include extreme/deviant case sampling, maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling, homogenous sampling, convenience sampling, chain referral, etc. I looked for recurring themes and narratives until I reached data saturation. By significant variants, I mean seeking extreme or deviant cases as well as covering a spectrum of perspectives (maximum variation).

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.

3 Your Wedding, Your Way

Personal choice reigns supreme in how couples construct contemporary weddings.⁷ Just as modern couples choose their marital partners, they also want to craft a wedding that manifests their particular desires, tastes, and beliefs. Although couples often negotiate some aspects of their weddings with parents or other concerned parties, the couples' expressive choices are paramount. Underlying contemporary American wedding culture, Rebecca Mead argues, is the idea that "a wedding ceremony, like a wedding reception, ought to be an expression of the character of the couple who are getting married, rather than an expression of the character of the institution marrying them" (2007, 139). Specifically linking this trend with ULC-ordained ministers, Mead attests that growing numbers of "unchurched" people desire "freelance, part-time" ministers who can offer "an aura of spirituality without the regulations of an organized religion" (138). Such weddings are an "expression of their taste when it came to religious ritual—their selection among an array of elements" they could include (136–137). As Howard Kirschenbaum and Rockwell Stensrud noted over forty years ago, "The personal wedding has revolutionized our society's way of thinking about rites of passage" (1974, 15). The ideology of personal choice continues to ground and shape American weddings today, including for nonreligious couples.

Starting in the 1960s, scholars documented a cultural turn away from more established religions (Wilson 1966), observing new forms of religious experimentation, spiritual seeking, and secularization (Roof 1993; Roof 2001; Wuthnow 1998; Wuthnow 2010). Progressive, anti-establishment attitudes challenged traditional religious institutions and orientations. Feminists and civil rights movements insisted on full equality, inclusion, and social justice. Increased social

⁷ Christel Manning has shown that personal choice also guides how nonreligious parents raise their children (2015).

mobility and higher education further threatened local affiliations and social mores. For many, the individual self became the locus of authority. This new era of “expressive individualism” affected all facets of American life, including marriage (Bellah et al. 1985, 33). Karen Dunak describes this trend toward “individual expression, personal authority, and cultural reinterpretation” as central to modern weddings, which eschew patriarchal forms of wedding ritualization and marriage, passé religious or parental expectations, and rigid conformity to social conventions (Dunak 2013, 6).⁸

Since the 1970s, books titled *Your Wedding, Your Way* (Ingram 2000; Naylor 2010; Newman 1975; Stoner 1993; Vincenzi 2003) have celebrated growing individualization in American weddings while noting declining religious elements. In 1975, Carol Newman offered tips for “planning and executing a personalized ceremony,” capturing a moment in the history of American weddings that increasingly emphasized prioritizing a couple’s choices for their ceremony above traditional wedding etiquette, parental concerns, and religious traditions (13).⁹ Her book included suggestions about outdoor wedding venues, modern spiritual readings, and “where to find a flexible officiant” who would be “open to the concept of the new wedding” (128). Clergy allowed couples to include less patriarchal or sexist language in ceremonies, for example, or to write their own vows. “Even within the traditional wedding,” Newman wrote, “personalization has become common practice” (134). The growth of personalized weddings went hand-in-hand with a turn toward spiritual and secular self-identifications, leading couples to evacuate religion from their ceremonies.¹⁰ As Marcia Seligson

8 Karen Dunak states, “Spirituality trumped organized religious belief. Personal selection and contribution were paramount” (2013, 85). Couples incorporated nonsexist language in their ceremonies, Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* or the “Apache Wedding Prayer” instead of biblical quotes, alternative clothing, outdoors locations, and other elements reflecting the new era. This “individualized approach to their weddings” reflected couples’ desires for “honesty and authenticity” as much as leftist politics or alternative lifestyles (92).

9 Leah Ingram similarly advised couples: “Forget what convention tells you to do. This is your day and you should have a wedding that truly reflects who you two are as a couple” (2000, xi).

10 Sharon Naylor encouraged couples to “break from tradition and create a one-of-a-kind celebration,” emphasizing that the wedding ceremony is “where you join your lives together in the manner of *your* choosing, with the words and the music *you* want, the rituals that mean the most to *you* [emphasis in original]” (2010, 31). This is in contrast to the “strong-handed direction to follow religious protocol, to include the types of rituals that mean the most to *them* [emphasis in original]” (15). Her oppositional view of religion shaped her recommendations for wedding location (“Look at nature as the ultimate religious location”) and officiant (suggesting the Celebrant Foundation & Institute, a civil servant, or “having a friend or relative ordained to perform your ceremony”), as well as many other wedding elements (34–35). In her list of values that shape couples’ desires for non-traditional weddings, “Religion is not a big part of your life”

noted of the “new wedding” of the 1960s, “Whatever the script created, most kids of the new world prefer that God be mentioned as little as possible” (1973, 278).¹¹ Similarly, today’s nonreligious couples—whether “spiritual but not religious” or secular—prefer to leave religion out of their weddings, even if they draw upon some religious ritual forms or otherwise bend traditions to their personal likings.

4 Secular Wedding Options

Nonreligious couples in America who do not want to be married by a traditional religious authority have limited options apart from a civil ceremony if they want their wedding to be legally valid. In the United States, each state regulates marriage differently, although all require a marriage license issued by civil officials. The vast majority of couples who wish to marry have only two options: a religious wedding performed by clergy (often labeled a “minister of the gospel” in state marital statutes) from a recognized religious organization or a secular wedding performed by a designated civil official (such as a judge). Religious ceremonies are often performed in churches or other religious buildings, but can also take place at other sites, depending on the flexibility of the clergy person performing the ceremony and the requirements of the religious tradition. The specific content of these ceremonies depends upon the dictates of the religion and the choices of the individual minister. Civil ceremonies usually take place in city halls or courthouses, although some civil officials may choose to perform ceremonies at other locations and times, depending on where and when a couple wishes to marry. Due to the constitutional prohibition on government establishment of religion, and since civil officiants are agents of the state, these ceremonies are supposed to be secular. Some states allow additional alternatives for couples, such as getting married by a notary public,¹² by someone who becomes

came first, followed by ecological living, a preference for unique or personalized elements, and other values (6).

11 Robert Bocock argued that there is a general trend away from religious ritual and toward secular forms in industrial societies, including in weddings and funerals (1974). Bryan Wilson also documented declines in religious weddings (1966). Nicholas MacMurray and Lori L. Fazzino discuss secular funerals in this volume.

12 Four states authorize notary publics to solemnize marriages: Florida, Maine, Nevada, and South Carolina. Kelle Clarke, a member of the National Notary Association, reports on the *Notary Bulletin* website that notaries in other states can get ordained online in order to officiate weddings (2014).

deputized for a day,¹³ or by self-solemnization,¹⁴ but these are not options in most states.

Secular wedding options usually do not provide the personalization that modern couples desire, or else are not legally valid. While tens of thousands of couples marry in civil ceremonies each year, courthouse weddings are typically standardized ceremonies led by a stranger with little tailoring for the individual couple. Aside from civil ceremonies, there are several secular organizations that authorize trained celebrants to perform weddings, including the Center for Inquiry (CFI), the Humanist Institute,¹⁵ the Humanist Society,¹⁶ and the Celebrant Foundation & Institute. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) will also perform atheist weddings. Although many couples get married by using such celebrants each year, several issues limit their reach and appeal: the process of becoming certified is lengthy and costly, few states recognize marriages solemnized by secular celebrants, and couples who want a personalized wedding prefer someone they know to officiate it.

In order to become a celebrant with one of these secular organizations or the UUA, one has to undertake a period of training, pay fees, and submit to the rules of the certifying body. For example, to become a CFI secular celebrant, an individual must become a member of the CFI, attend a training, obtain letters of recommendation, write an essay describing one's worldview, interview with CFI directors, obtain approval, and pay initial and yearly fees.¹⁷ Similarly, the Humanist Institute requires applicants to complete online training; the Humanist Society requires an application, a fee, and membership in the American Humanist Association; and the Celebrant Foundation and Institute requires lengthy training and higher fees in order to become a "Certified Life-Cycle Celebrant™." These rules make it hard for nonreligious couples to have someone they know

13 Alaska, California, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Washington, D.C., for example, allow people to become a "deputy marriage commissioner for a day" or "temporary officiant" (or similar title) so that they can perform a particular civil ceremony. There are several requirements in order to become deputized, such as paying a fee and obtaining paperwork from the county clerk's office, with specific requirements dependent on local statutes.

14 Colorado, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C., allow couples to self-solemnize (perform their own marriage), for example.

15 The Humanist Institute is an affiliate of the American Humanist Association.

16 The Humanist Society is an adjunct of the American Humanist Association.

17 The CFI further notes that it "does not allow anyone acting as a CFI Secular Celebrant to solemnize a marriage under any religious designation or pretense, or using the certification of any religious organization," including the Humanist Society and "so called 'mail order' ordinations such as the Universal Life Church." "CFI Celebrant Certification," Center for Inquiry, accessed March 1, 2016, http://www.centerforinquiry.net/education/celebrant_certification/.

become certified to perform their ceremony. Furthermore, most states do not permit celebrants trained by secular organizations to solemnize legal marriages, and there are very few secular celebrants in states where this is permitted.¹⁸ The UUA, by contrast, is recognized by every state as a religious organization whose marriage solemnizations are valid.

More importantly, none of the couples I interviewed considered a secular celebrant because such celebrants pose the same problem as clergy and civil officiants: lack of a personal relationship with the couple. The driving motivation for nonreligious couples to ask their friends or family to become ULC ministers is so that they can have someone they know well perform an intimate, heartfelt wedding tailored to that specific couple, while reflecting their nonreligious worldviews. A celebrant trained by one of the aforementioned secular organizations or a UUA minister could offer a customized ceremony, but she likely would not be someone with whom the couple had a prior relationship; instead, she would be a stranger who the couple contracted for a service. A friend ordained online by the ULC, for free, without any creedal commitment or organizational oversight, allows nonreligious couples to marry however they wish assured that their ceremony will be recognized as legally valid. It can be a romantic, perhaps humorous, and personally-meaningful celebration led by a close friend or relative of their choosing.

5 The Universal Life Church

The story of the ULC is a prism for contemporary American religion, reflecting trends in emerging forms of spirituality, secularization, individualization, and state regulation of new religions. Kirby J. Hensley (1911–1999) incorporated the ULC in 1962 in Modesto, California, offering free ordinations to anyone

18 In 2013, Washington, D.C., began allowing “civil celebrants” trained by a secular or nonreligious organization to perform marriage ceremonies, and New Jersey became the first state to authorize “civil celebrants” to solemnize marriages in 2014. Oregon followed suit in 2017. The CFI won a federal lawsuit, *Center for Inquiry v. Marion Circuit Court Clerk*, in 2014 forcing Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin to recognize CFI secular celebrants as lawful marriage officiants. In 2014, Nevada changed its marriage statutes to permit notary publics to perform weddings after humanists and atheists filed a lawsuit. As of 2015, due to a lawsuit, Washington County, Minnesota became the fourth county in that state to allow atheists accredited by a nonbeliever organization to perform weddings; bills that would allow atheists to officiate weddings have also been introduced in the state legislature. Movements in the United Kingdom similarly advocate that governments recognize humanist weddings (Engelke 2014; Law Commission 2015). New York has long permitted Ethical Culture Society leaders to solemnize marriages.

who wanted one. He had preached earlier in Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, but they dismissed him due to his unorthodox beliefs and provocative preaching style. In founding his own church, Hensley wanted to “make it possible for *anybody* to be ordained... No matter *what* he believes [emphasis in original]” (Ashmore 1977, 21). The ULC had no doctrine except to do “*that which is right... and every person has the right to decide what is right for himself* [emphasis in original]” (24). Hensley’s church is a religious institution flexible enough to accept all manner of beliefs and practices, including Christianity, Judaism, Asian religions, UFOs, New Thought, metaphysical spiritualities, and atheism.¹⁹ In addition to shielding ministers from any doctrinal orthodoxy that might be imposed by church hierarchies, the ULC defends individual religious freedom from state regulation. As he told one college audience, “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 [emphasis in original]” (52). Hensley called the ULC a “buffer zone” for religious liberty, protecting ministers from the encroachments of both church and state while ensuring that no outside authority would dictate or delimit a person’s beliefs or practices (1986).

The unconventional form and content of the ULC helped it grow rapidly, ordaining over one million ministers by 1971, but it also brought challenges from government regulators and skeptical media. Draft boards complained that the church encouraged Vietnam War draftees to resist conscription by claiming the draft’s ministerial exemption. California’s tax agency argued that the church served as a for-profit diploma mill, since it offered honorary doctorate degrees for a fee without state accreditation. The IRS refused to grant the church tax-exempt status. However, the ULC sued and a federal judge ordered the IRS to recognize it as a tax-exempt religion in *Universal Life Church v. U.S.* (1974). The court also declared that states cannot require accreditation for honorary theological degrees. Hensley and the ULC touted this ruling in publications, subsequent legal arguments, and in the media, including during their long-running dispute with the IRS after it revoked the ULC’s tax exemption in 1984 for advocating tax avoidance schemes. By that year, the ULC had ordained over 12 million ministers. In the 1970s-1980s, a number of legal cases challenged the legitimacy of ULC weddings in state courts, but over time judges have generally ruled in favor of their validity (Rains 2010).²⁰ Unlike childbirth or puberty rituals or funerals, wed-

¹⁹ For example, Hensley ordained Madalyn Murray O’Hair, the founder of American Atheists, awarded her honorary degrees, and issued a charter for her Poor Richard’s Universal Life Church in Austin, Texas (Ashmore 1977, 39; LeBeau 2003, 148–150).

²⁰ The first of these, *Ravenal v. Ravenal* (1972), centered on a New York couple’s divorce wherein the man argued that he owed no alimony due to the fact that they were never legally married.

dings must conform to state marital statutes in order to count as legal marriages; they are governed by laws in ways that other lifecycle rituals are not (Cott 2000). Despite the few states where ULC weddings were litigated, the vast majority of states have always accepted ULC weddings as legally valid.²¹ The ULC encourages ministers to check with each county in which marriages will be performed to ensure their legal validity.²²

The judge agreed, declaring the marriage void since the ULC minister and the ULC itself did not meet the state's definitions of a church or of a minister eligible to solemnize marriages. Many laws governing marriage require ecclesiastical bodies to have some structure managing their clergy and for ministers to maintain a regular house of worship, meeting times, and membership. The ULC's loose ecclesiology did not fit these state definitions of religion and ministry, judges ruled. This early decision would be affirmed in later cases, *Rubino v. City of New York* (1984) and *Ranieri v. Ranieri* (1989), although a different New York court, in *Oswald v. Oswald* (2013), ruled recently that the ULC counts as a religion and its ministers are eligible to solemnize marriages. The judge in the latter case argued that the ULC, while unconventional, is a religion if it says it is and that courts should not second guess church decisions about their own ordination processes. The logic of these two positions, for and against the ULC, played out in several other cases. In *Cramer v. Commonwealth* (1974) and *State v. Lynch* (1980), Virginia and North Carolina's supreme courts ruled that the ULC is not a church and that its ministers are not clergy according to their state statutes defining these terms, while Mississippi's supreme court ruled in favor of the ULC in *Last Will and Testament of Blackwell v. Magee* (1988). Judges in Washington, D.C., ruled against the ULC in 1981 (*In re: Dixon*) but for it in 1998 (*In re: Stack*). Judges in different Pennsylvania counties ruled against the ULC in 2007 (*Heyer v. Hollerbush*) and for it in 2008 (*In re: O'Neill*). A 2001 Utah bill prohibiting recognition of marriages performed by ministers who are ordained by mail or online was ruled unconstitutional by a federal judge in *Universal Life Church v. Utah* (2002). In 2006, the New York City Clerk's office issued a rule allowing ULC ministers to officiate weddings in the five boroughs. Additionally, a New York Assemblywoman has tried to pass a bill from 2005 to at least 2012 that would grant online officiants legal power to solemnize marriages throughout the state. The overall trend is that the more recent decisions recognize the ULC as a religion and its weddings as legally valid.

21 Indeed, the few jurisdictions where ULC weddings are not honored due to judicial rulings are Virginia, North Carolina, and parts of Pennsylvania and New York. In personal phone calls with clerks and recorders in each jurisdiction in which ULC marriages are supposedly invalid, I was told that marriage licenses are recorded without inspection as to the ecclesiastical body ordaining the minister. In effect, ULC weddings in these jurisdictions are processed successfully nearly all the time.

22 New Haven County in Connecticut refused to accept my ULC ordination as valid for performing a marriage there when I called in the summer of 2015. This seems to run counter to an official opinion of the Connecticut General Assembly's Office of Legislative Research, which declares that "Nothing in statute or case law appears to prohibit mail order ministers from performing marriages in Connecticut" (OLR 2003-R-0490). I have officiated legally valid weddings in four states. New Haven and Frodsham, England are the only two jurisdictions that did not accept my ULC ordination; nevertheless, I performed ceremonial weddings for each of these two couples, even though they were married legally in civil ceremonies earlier in the day.

The expansion of the internet in the 1990s broadened the ULC's reach and further connected it to wedding personalization. In 1995, the ULC created a website offering online ordinations and retailing ministerial products under a subsidiary called the Universal Life Church Monastery (ULC Monastery). Newspapers ran stories about journalists getting ordained online, celebrity ordinations, and nontraditional weddings led by ULC ministers, further promoting the ULC as a way for nontraditional or nonreligious couples to personalize their weddings. After Kirby Hensley died, the ULC settled with the IRS. Internally, it lost control of the ULC Monastery, which was reincorporated as an independent entity in Seattle, Washington by George Freeman, a ULC minister who thought that the church was not harnessing the power of the internet as much as it should. Today, the ULC Monastery owns hundreds of online ordination websites, directing web searches to the ULC Monastery; most people ordained online today are ULC Monastery ministers.²³ In the early 2000s, two ULC ministers created the Universal Life Church Seminary and the Universal Life Church Online, both affiliated with the original ULC. These sites offer ordinations and sell their own ministerial products; they united into one organization, also called the Universal Life Church Seminary, in early 2016. In this chapter, I will use the name Universal Life Church or ULC to refer to all of these churches, unless I am referring to a particular church, in which case I will identify that specific church by name.

6 A ULC Wedding

In this section, I present an example of a nonreligious couple who got married by a friend who was ordained online by the ULC so that she could perform their wedding. Given the diversity of the types of couples and weddings I encountered in my study of ULC weddings, no single story can capture this variety. Still, Scott and Sadie's worldviews and wedding include many of the characteristics that appeared frequently in accounts of personalized, nonreligious ULC weddings.

Scott and Sadie got married in 2010 in Portland, Oregon. They had both moved to Portland to attend college and then remained in the city after graduation. Even though they were just acquaintances during school, their friendship eventually grew into something more, as camping trips and regular hikes became stepping stones to developing their romantic relationship. They dated for

²³ The ULC Monastery ordains around 1,000 people per day, according to my 2014 interview with its president, George Freeman. In 2009, Andre Hensley said that the ULC ordained 8,500–10,000 ministers per month (Nowicki 2009).

six years before getting married, which they agreed “brought us together more as partners.” Even though they had lived together before marrying and had already committed themselves to each other, they felt that having a legal marriage and ceremony “substantiated the relationship.” They are now in their mid-30s and raising a son.

Sadie grew up near Boston in an Italian-Irish Catholic family, attending church regularly, but she left the church in high school after a class inspired her critical evaluation of religion in general, leading her to refuse confirmation rites. “I started learning about religion and religious history and decided—I was never really that into going to church anyways—and I didn’t really want to be a part of the church and so I separated myself from that,” she said. “I have not embodied any religion since then. I’m not really interested in it,” she added. Instead, in Portland, she has developed a strong circle of interpersonal support and a deeper connection with nature.

I know a lot of people love their churches for things like community, but I feel like, living here in Portland, we have so many awesome friends and neighbors and colleagues that we just have such a strong community in all *that* that I don’t feel like I need a church in addition to that. And so, I’m not a religious person at all, but I love nature and science, and I feel like I get all my spiritual needs fulfilled by all that.

For Sadie, being outside in nature is peaceful and rejuvenating, a “place of meditation”: “I feel like that’s what church is. It’s a break from reality where you can get a little peace and reset, and I feel like I find that in other ways.” Describing herself as a “very rational, practical person,” Sadie asserts that she does not believe in religion and that it is not something she thinks about much. “It’s not a part of my life,” she said, adding that she would not involve their son in religion either. Sadie described her view as both “anti-religion” and indifferent to religion in her everyday life.

Scott was raised in a liberal Methodist church near San Francisco but he quit religion soon after his confirmation ceremony. Like Sadie, a high school course where he learned “all the awful things the institution has done” catalyzed his change. Additionally, “the concept of feeling spiritual and feeling connected to something else just... drifted away. Without a thought.” Over time, he drifted further away from religion or spirituality and towards indifference.

For a long time, I thought, “Oh, I’m agnostic.” I’m almost more atheist now? Like, I would defend the argument that there is no god. It’s not like, all of a sudden, there’s going to be evidence at some point that there is some god so I should be agnostic. I just say, whatever comes, comes. But at the same time, I don’t think about it a lot, so maybe that is more agnostic, right? It’s kind of like whatever. To be atheist is to, like, really, think about it, process it. I don’t think I really do that much.

Neither Scott nor Sadie are sure about what terms like agnostic mean, but they also do not care about such labels, asserting that these identifications are not salient for them. Family and friends are most important in their lives, alongside other commitments and pleasures such as sustainability, good food, and the natural world. Scott added, “Sometimes I feel like we don’t have a formalized process for reflection, which kind of is too bad, but going out hiking allows for that, I think, just as much as sitting in church. You know? I dunno. I listen to *Fresh Air*. Terry Gross is my pastor [*Laughs*]. *This American Life* is our church service.” Sadie echoed: “Terry Gross is our pastor.” Both Scott and Sadie articulate a language of meditation and reflection that is connected to nature, and which they consider a secular analogue to church, but irony and ambiguity also suffuse their use of culturally-typical terminology for religious polity and practice. Ultimately, quibbles about terms such as agnostic or atheist are unimportant to them, as is the topic of religion. They share a secular orientation but it is one that operates on an implicit level, which becomes operationalized during the context of my interview with them.

Given their nonreligious worldviews and desire for a personalized, outdoors wedding, Scott and Sadie immediately gravitated towards asking a friend to obtain ordination online from the ULC. Scott first learned about the ULC through a high school friend who had gotten ordained in high school or college. As far as he was aware, the only purpose of the church was to facilitate weddings. He said, “I remember it being kind of like a gag-y thing where you’re like, ‘Oh. I could become an ordained minister and marry people? Huh!’” His wife Sadie had a similar understanding of the church and its utility: “neither of us are religious or practice any religion, so we were just looking for something that was... not affiliated with a religious practice, and so... that’s why we went with the Universal Life Church.” For Scott and Sadie, the ULC is a nonreligious religious organization, one which they do not consider to be religious in terms of dogmas or community, but which they think is considered a religion legally in order for the weddings conducted by its ministers to be counted as legally valid. Sadie added an additional reason for choosing the ULC: “We also wanted our friend to marry us. And that provided a way for her to be able to do that.” They quickly settled on their college friend, Niki, asking her to get ordained by the ULC in order to perform their wedding ceremony.

Despite their appreciation for the ULC as a vehicle for personalized weddings, Scott and Sadie are critical of the institutional structures leading them to ask their friend to get ordained in the first place. As Scott said, “I think anybody should just be able to marry you and then submit the paperwork, and be on record as having married a person.” Couples should not have to choose between a secular civil official or a religious minister, they claim, even if that minister is a

friend who is avowedly nonreligious and only technically a minister by virtue of having been ordained online in a religion they know almost nothing about. The ULC, Scott said, is “more of a contemporary fix to an out-of-date kind of procedure, y’know? Maybe not out-of-date, but... it’s like a patch, y’know?” Similarly, Sadie did not like the fact that the ULC connection tinged their wedding with the veneer of religiosity. “I don’t see why they have to be ordained. It sort of puts a religious... edge on it that... I’m not really that interested in,” she said. It would be better, they argued, for the marriage solemnization process to be simplified such that any adult can perform marriage ceremonies and sign the legal paperwork, not just certain civil or religious officials. But given the current marital relations statutes, for them the idea of asking a friend to get ordained has become an unfortunately necessary step in legitimizing their marriage in the eyes of the state.

When I asked Scott and Sadie about what other options they considered for legally solemnizing their marriage, they said the only option they had considered was having a friend do it. When pressed about why they did not select a civil ceremony, Sadie said, “I wanted to get married with friends and family. I don’t even know how many people you could have in a courthouse.” Scott added, “I think probably the biggest thing is it being somebody... you know. The idea of somebody marrying you who doesn’t even know you... or performing a civil ceremony and it’s someone you don’t know...” The idea of a ceremony presided over by a stranger, a civil functionary, seemed weird to them and out of step with the spirit of an intimate, communal event such as their wedding. Similarly, a more traditional religious wedding was never on the table. “We would not have ended up at a church, that’s for sure,” Scott said, before stating that churches have “doctrines and dogmas” to which he does not subscribe. In Oregon, where they live and got married, the only options for legally valid weddings are those conducted by civil or religious figures. Given that they are not religious and desired greater personalization than a civil ceremony would allow, they opted for the ULC as a convenient work-around since its status as a recognized religion guaranteed their marriage’s legal validity while also ensuring their ability to obtain a secular wedding ceremony that celebrated their values and community. Their friend network espouses similar values. In their time as a couple, they have attended only one traditionally religious wedding and no civil ceremonies. All of their other friends were married by the nonreligious friends of nonreligious couples, under the auspices of the ULC.

The process of creating their wedding ceremony, with their friend Niki presiding, was significant for Scott and Sadie. Niki “was just a perfect fit,” Sadie said. “She’s really creative and funny, and... she just pretty much had all the qualities we wanted.” Well-spoken in public, funny, thoughtful, creative, and a

close friend—these are the traits Scott and Sadie cherished in Niki, and which led them to ask her to officiate their wedding. “Niki asked us all the things that we wanted to include in the ceremony. It was really our own creation that we made with her, and it was.... special that way,” Sadie said. Moreover, she added, “It was nice to see that people really supported us and were happy to be there, happy to be a part of making that happen.” Cherished bonds of friendship and intimacy proved the foundation for their wedding and for their choice of officiant. It would have been incongruous and impersonal had they chosen a civil official or a more traditionally religious minister. The process of crafting their ceremony with Niki “created a bond” between them that they said made them “feel closer” to Niki.

Their wedding took place outdoors on an island in the Columbia River just north of Portland. The outdoor setting was important to them because they love being in nature and outdoors activities were central to their early relationship. “Ultimately, we wanted a place that was meaningful to us... and we had previously, when we were dating, we had a whole day adventure out there, and had had a picnic at this park before,” Sadie said. Desiring a casual, intimate wedding, they invited a small group of friends and family, who sat on picnic blankets. One friend, who came dressed in lederhosen, served as an impromptu ring bearer. Two others offered readings tailored for the couple. Sadie loved how much joy infused their ceremony. Niki’s wedding outfit was a “librarian-esque style getup, with her big glasses, and she came up with a huge book as her notebook—it was really funny,” Sadie said. The text of the ceremony was nonreligious, reflecting their secular orientations. “I think that what we both read were just expressions of whatever experiences and memories and things that... make us right for each other. Speaking from the heart, y’know? As spiritual as *that* is, right? But nothing formally spiritual,” Scott said. He added, “Niki did a really good job. She took it seriously, y’know? And I think that could be a concern. I think that’s why we made sure we thought about who we wanted, and why she really stuck, was because she’s somebody who is fun and casual but knows how to take things seriously and speak from the heart.” It was important to them to balance humor and creativity with thoughtfulness and sincerity in their wedding ceremony, as well as to celebrate with close friends and family. The ULC offered them a way to have the wedding of their dreams while also ensuring its legal validity.

7 General Trends in ULC Weddings

The primary reason people join the ULC is to officiate weddings for friends or family. In my survey and interviews, couples repeatedly expressed a desire for someone they knew to officiate their ceremony. Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents who are ULC ministers (N=1,584) reported that they liked that they could officiate weddings after being ordained, and 79% of couples married by a ULC minister (N=207) said that they were friends (61%) or relatives (18%) of their officiant. Seventy-seven percent of couples married by a ULC minister did not consider getting married by traditional clergy, and 67% did not consider getting married by a civil official. Ministers described how meaningful it was for them to help their friends or relatives celebrate their weddings. Adelaide said, “I think having somebody that knows you a little better makes it more meaningful” than a random clergyperson or civil official. An officiant who had gotten ordained as a joke but later officiated his friend’s wedding remarked, “I didn’t realize how deeply, deeply meaningful it actually is when you actually do this.” 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.” A groom who was married by a friend later joined the ULC himself in hopes of performing a friend’s wedding: “It would be a great honor,” he said. The gravity and intimacy of presiding over the wedding of a loved one deepens bonds of affection not only between the couple but also amongst the couple and their officiant, and into their wider social networks.

Most of the couples married by ULC ministers who participated in my research reported that they are not religious, although over two-thirds said that they are spiritual. Of those married by a ULC minister (N=207), 69% reported that they do not consider themselves a member of any religious organization. Given the chance to select multiple identifications, 72% described themselves as spiritual, 64% as humanist, 47% as secular, 37% as agnostic, 32% as apathetic or indifferent, and 27% as atheistic. 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.” Only a minority of my interviewees articulated unambiguous atheist, agnostic, or spiritual identities, with most shifting between different categorizations, ultimately claiming that they are “not religious” and

that religion is not central to their lives. For example, one bride described herself this way:

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.

Scott and Sadie similarly played with various identifications—atheist, spiritual, agnostic, disinterested—without settling on any single label, except perhaps for consistently articulating themselves as generically nonreligious. This may reflect an ambiguity in the terms themselves, an indifference toward choosing precise terms or ignorance of various meanings of such terms on the part of participants, or a fuzziness, hurriedness, or weariness brought about by the out-of-the-ordinary interview/survey context that called for such identifications on the spot.

ULC weddings were described as nonreligious and usually as not spiritual either. Seventy-one percent of people married by a ULC minister said that their ceremony included no language or readings from religious or spiritual texts. In my interviews, very few respondents reported getting married in a church or another religious building; instead, the vast majority were married outdoors or at a rented wedding venue. While most of the weddings used the traditional form of a generic Protestant wedding, including walking down an aisle and exchanging vows and rings, they also innovated by evacuating the ceremony of supernatural referents and incorporating words and/or rituals unique to their own relationships and sensibilities.²⁴ Only a couple of the weddings I performed for friends or family included readings from religious or spiritual texts, with couples opting instead for no readings or for secular poetry, such as by e. e. cummings or Pablo Neruda. Most of the weddings I officiated took place outdoors, on farms, by rivers or lakes, under tall trees or in a clearing on a sunny day; the others took place at venues such as concert or reception halls. Other couples, like Scott and Sadie, loved the humorous yet serious ceremony their friend Niki wrote with and presented for them at a picnic wedding. One couple I inter-

24 Ronald Grimes is skeptical about alternative weddings, arguing that they are “culturally constrained” with recognizable themes and predictable sentiments (2000, 208). However, he also notes that, “At marriage, more intensely than at any other Western passage, primary participants become ritually active in designing, deciding, and choosing elements for the rite... they conduct research, scour their traditions, consult friend and relatives, negotiate values, and invent ceremonies” (213).

viewed, avid bicycle commuters both, invited guests to ride with them in a procession through the city to their venue, an industrial warehouse turned into an events center. All of the ceremonies I experienced or heard about expressed each couples' nonreligious worldviews and personal visions for their wedding days, and each couple told me how special their ceremony was and how meaningful it was for their friend or relative to help them through the process of becoming married.

8 ULC Weddings as Religious-Secular Entanglements

Consideration of the ULC and weddings solemnized by its ministers presents problems for certain classificatory schema in religious studies and in the social scientific study of religion, especially the religious/secular binary. There already exists a healthy literature criticizing this dichotomy (e.g., Asad 2003), yet in closing I want to explore four areas where I see religious and secular labels blurring and interpenetrating in connection with the ULC. These areas include: the ULC's double mission, ministers' self-identifications, couples' valuations of their weddings, and valuations of spirituality and intimate relationships. These entanglements occur because of a complex web of state and federal laws, ULC ministerial structures and processes, and social and cultural transformations such as the growth of "spirituality" and other "third term" designations denoting something between or against religion and secularism, but always in relation to them (Bender 2012; Bender and Taves 2012).

The ULC's twin mission for religious freedom implicates it as both secular and religious simultaneously. Hensley's vision for the ULC as a bulwark for liberty of conscience and religious practice over against any *church* regulation of religion coexists alongside the ULC as a protector of religious liberty over against any *state* regulation of religious belief and practice. Its litigation history in federal and state courts demonstrates the difficulty governments and judges have had in deciding whether the ULC counts as a *bona fide* religion or not. Was its church polity too amorphous, its ordination process too easy, and its doctrine too short to be taken seriously as a religion worthy of all the rights and benefits accorded to religious organizations in American law and society? Judges and regulators at both state and federal levels arrived at different conclusions, with some ruling that the ULC was not a religion and its clergy were not ministers while others decided in favor of the ULC by analogizing it to mass revivals or Martin Luther's priesthood of all believers. In insisting on being treated equally

with other religions, the ULC reveals the limits of religious freedom while also expanding them for itself and others. ULC legal cases demonstrate the church's commitment to defending its own religious prerogatives as well as those of its ministers against state action, all while making no theological or other demands upon its members. The ULC was founded to protect First Amendment freedoms as much as to resist the imposition of dogmatic orthodoxies.

A majority of ULC ministers self-identify as nonreligious, usually as "spiritual but not religious," yet they are technically religious officials of the ULC—and it is in this very capacity that the weddings they perform are considered to be legal marriages. Their self-identifications bleed from one category to another, including multiple yet seemingly contradictory simultaneous labels, such as when Scott said that he is nonreligious, agnostic, atheist, and spiritual all within the span of a few minutes.²⁵ Such ambiguous articulations already imply problems with rigid religious/secular dichotomizations, but adding the fact that these ministers perceive themselves as nonreligious calls into question not only what it means to be a religious leader in the ULC but also what it means to be a minister capable of solemnizing marriages legally. For many ULC ministers, they are nonreligious except for the moment they check the box marked "religious" on a marriage license, write down their denomination and title, and complete the form. In that moment, they agree that they are indeed religious ministers, if only nominally and fleetingly. Most couples married by ULC ministers are self-described nonreligious people who want a personalized, nonreligious ceremony performed by someone they know well, yet they acknowledge that for the purpose of making their wedding legally valid it must be considered religious in the eyes of the state. In terms of emptying their weddings of explicitly religious content, these weddings are nonreligious and on par with a secular civil ceremony. However, their ritualization choices largely mirror traditional Christian wedding practices, including a leader standing at the front of the assembly, the couple processing down an aisle, introductory remarks welcoming guests and discussing love and marriage, readings from texts, perhaps a ritual (such as lighting a unity candle), exchanges of vows and rings, and the pronouncement and presentation followed by a recessional.²⁶ The content may be secularized but the form largely

²⁵ Religious, spiritual, secular, and nonreligious identities are not stable, unitary formations (Chaves 2010; Hackett 2014; Lee 2014). Terms like religion, spirituality, secularism, and nonreligion are discursive constructions contingently articulated in particular locations at specific times for particular purposes, that is, in a contextualized "religion-related field" (Quack 2014; von Stuckrad 2013).

²⁶ This description closely matches that of the wedding script suggested for CFI weddings (Cimino and Smith 2014, 130–131) and the *Humanist Wedding Service* written by renowned human-

copies religious ceremonies. ULC weddings are both religious and secular: non-religious in intention yet religious in structure and by state classification.

ULC weddings are also sites of sacralization, valued by participants as experiences of high honor, as deeply personally meaningful, as sacred.²⁷ One groom, who described himself as “spiritual but not religious” and who had also officiated a wedding for a friend, told me, “[T]he institution of marriage is not something I find sacred but I do find sacred love and being committed to the one I love.” Love holds a special place for people involved in weddings—for the couple marrying, for the gathered friends and family who support their union, and for the friend-officiant who conducts the ceremony. Another groom, an atheist who had also officiated one wedding, told me that he was attracted to the ULC because, “This is how we make things sacred.” Terms like “sacred,” “honor,” “deeply meaningful,” and “spirituality” mark a set of terms that elide the arbitrary bifurcation between religious and secular (Bender and Taves 2012; Huss 2014).²⁸ Kim Knott has labeled marriage, and values such as the right to marry, as “the secular sacred” (2013).²⁹ By studying self-conscious “processes

ist Corliss Lamont (1972). New York Society for Ethical Culture leader Khoren Arisian similarly formats weddings this way (1973). The British humanists Matthew Engelke has studied “do not want belief, but they do want belonging” in their wedding ceremonies (2014, 300).

27 Sacralization refers here to the process of deeming or valuating something as “sacred,” special, or set apart from ordinary life. I use it to categorize first-order ascriptions of “specialness,” not an inherent or *sui generis* quality of things (Taves 2009, 17). In *Living the Secular Life* (2014), sociologist Phil Zuckerman observed, “People—even the most ardently secular—still want, need, and enjoy structured moments of reflection, recognition, and consecration... But they don’t want these to be religious in nature... But they still yearn for a meaningful, authentic ceremony that allows them to come together and be a part of a ritualized gathering that marks the occasion as special, set apart, sincere, heartfelt” (186).

28 Boaz Huss argues, “I think there is a considerable decline in the cultural power of the disjunction between the religious and the secular, and a growing tendency to blur the distinctions between these two (postulated) oppositional realms. The decline of religion and the secular as key cultural concepts comes to the fore in the growing number of people who refuse to define themselves as either religious or secular, in the growing popularity of the folk concept of ‘spirituality’ that transgresses this binary opposition, and in the formation of new social institutions and practices (mostly belonging to New Age culture) that indeed challenge and defy the distinction between the religious and the secular” (2014, 100–101).

29 According to Knott, “...those forging social identities in secular contexts—who draw on non-religious commitments and beliefs, including atheism, humanism, and secularism—mark as ‘sacred’ those occasions (such as marriage), persons (a lover), things (a ring), places (a registry office) and principles (equality and justice) that they value above all others, and that they see as set apart and inviolable: those things that may be deemed to be *both* secular *and* sacred [emphasis in original]” (2013, 160). Similarly, ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes claims that the “eclecticism and bleeding of boundaries that characterize the alternative wedding scene testify

of valuation and meaning making" in particular contexts, we can see how messy and entangled events are on the ground (Bender and Taves 2012, 2). We can also then see how nonreligious material practices and ritualizations complicate simplistic understandings of what secularity and nonreligion mean, such as if they are taken to mean merely atheism and agnosticism instead of a wider assortment of frames, seemingly contradictory self-identifications, and religo-secular interpenetrations (Lee 2012).

The ULC is a "religion of convenience," as one interviewee called it, a "cultural resource" (Beckford 1992, 171; Swidler 1986, 281) which allows nonreligious individuals and couples to create personalized, nonreligious weddings that are legally valid. Getting ordained online is a "pragmatic religious practice" (Smilde 2013, 44) for these nonreligious ministers, one that leads them toward a "sacred" goal of uniting two people who love each other in marriage.³⁰ Even if nonbeliever organizations and secular celebrants are allowed to solemnize marriages legally, they will encounter the same limitation as civil ceremonies: lack of a meaningful relationship with the couple. Modern nonreligious couples seeking personalized celebrations are willing to strategically adopt a religious label in order to achieve their wedding, their way.

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to the permeability of what were once regarded as impenetrable social and religious barriers" (2000, 208).

30 David Smilde holds that pragmatic religious practices are "oriented toward addressing concrete dilemmas in the here and now, and they are evaluated by their success in doing so" (2013, 44).

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