

'LOVED THE WEDDING, INVITE ME TO THE MARRIAGE': THE SECULARISATION OF WEDDINGS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

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C O N T E X T The title of this article was taken from a large poster on the notice board outside a church near the author's home. The word 'God' was added to denote the supposed source of the message to passers-by.

Walliss notes that this poster can be understood either as pointing out that many couples marry in a church but then have no further involvement with the church, or as putting forward the view that Christianity ought to be part of a couple's lives throughout the marriage.

The poster thus directs attention to phenomena linked to the process of secularisation. Church weddings are in decline: in 2002, of a total of 85,870 marriages only 33.8% involved a religious ceremony. This represented a fall of 16% over ten years, with a particularly sharp fall after the 1994 Marriage Act which greatly increased the number and variety of places in which civil (non-religious) weddings could take place. After 1994, there was a rapid growth in the number of premises in which weddings could be held and these now include hotels, stately homes

and sports and leisure clubs.

Those who argue that secularisation is at an advanced stage such as Bruce (2001) would see this as evidence of the decline of Christianity as a cultural and institutional force. Alternatively, the fact that as many as a third of marriages are religious could be taken as evidence of a continuing level of belief despite the fall in church attendances and in other measures of religious observance - many people who do not go to church still choose religious weddings. This supports the 'believing without belonging' argument in suggesting that significant numbers still hold private religious beliefs which prompt them to use a religious context for ceremonies such as weddings. The decline in church weddings also points to the declining part played by religious institutions in everyday life, with roles increasingly taken over by secular agencies.

FIND OUT MORE

Walliss, J. (2002) 'Loved The Wedding, Invite Me To The Marriage': The Secularisation Of Weddings In Contemporary Britain. *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 7 (4)

www.socresonline.org.uk/7/4/walliss.html

Bruce, S. (2001), 'Christianity' in Britain R.I.P. in *Sociology of Religion* vol. 62 (2). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Day, A. (2007), A Sociology of Belief in *Sociology Review*, vol. 16 (4)

Day, A. (2007) 'A Sociology of Belief' in *Sociology Review* vol. 16 (4). Deddington: Philip Allan

www.statistics.co.uk
(search for 'marriages')

METHODS

Walliss's research is an attempt to find out why seemingly secular couples marrying for the first time often choose a religious wedding ceremony rather than any of the other widely available non-religious options. He describes this as the 'personal dimension' of the secularisation of weddings. He chose to carry out informal interviews, producing qualitative data, allowing his respondents to express themselves in their own way rather than answering questions with pre-set categories as answers.

Walliss carried out interviews with 25 couples, 15 of whom had either had a church wedding in the previous ten years or were planning to do so, and ten of whom had had a civil ceremony in the same period. Of the latter group, half their ceremonies took place in registry offices and half in approved premises. Some of the sample were contacted via personal links and snowballing and others via an e-mail mailing list. Nearly all were between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties and were getting married for the first time. They were all, with one exception, white, English and Christian in the sense of having been brought up in a mainly Christian culture. Walliss interviewed most of the couples together face-to-face but comments that the men said very little and allowed their wives to answer most of the questions. Some respondents were interviewed by telephone; most of these were wives or wives to be. Walliss also interviewed face-to-face two registrars, six managers of approved premises and four members of the clergy.

KEY FINDINGS

Walliss found that religious beliefs played only a small role in the choice of wedding location. Three other considerations were more significant.

1. 'The traditional thing to do':

the idea that a church is the only kind of place fitting for a wedding.

'I think it's every woman's right to get married in a church... it's like your day to be a princess, isn't it? I know it sounds daft. You're on show for that one day and hopefully you do it just once in a lifetime so you should make it count I think.'

2. The influence of parents or others, especially when paying for the wedding.

'... to please my parents more than anything else. There would have been pressure. They would have disapproved if I'd just gone and got married in a registry office.'

Wallis notes that some parents took over the organisation of the wedding completely, and that this could also apply to non-religious weddings.

3. Aesthetic considerations.

These were linked to the idea of tradition and a feeling that the ceremony should take

place in a traditional-looking setting. One clergyman commented on the way in which some couples 'parachuted in' to his small, traditional-looking village church and then would not be seen again:

'... some people in the church that I'm responsible for... think that people are using the church because I have a very beautiful church with stained glass windows, very, very beautiful and the right size for weddings... and some people in my congregation think they're only using the church for their own purpose...'

Respondents often said that weddings in registry offices and other places did not feel 'right'. This could however apply to modern churches too:

'I mean there's a church around here and it's built like a pyramid, you know, a very modern thing, and I couldn't imagine getting married in something like that.'

Among respondents who chose a civil wedding, a common idea was that it was hypocritical for non-religious people to marry in a church.

Those who chose approved premises cited reasons such as the ability to control the wedding, for example in deciding how the room was decorated, and in choosing music ('our song' rather than hymns). Yet even here, there was a role for tradition:

'If you can imagine the church wedding but without the religious element, that's what I got... I still got to walk up the aisle with my dad and I still had bridesmaids... but the religious aspects were taken out because they didn't actually mean a great deal to us.'

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This research contributes to the debates on secularisation and on religiosity in Britain today. It identifies a continuing desire for traditions associated with religion, even among people who would not see themselves as religious, and in this way suggests a survival and continuing role for religion, at least for ceremonies associated with rites of passage. Despite the supposed greater choices as traditions break down in a postmodern world, the respondents here desire tradition. On the other hand, the attraction of church weddings seems more related to the idea of what is 'traditional' and 'right' rather than any religious content. As Walliss puts it, 'God may... not even be invited to the church itself, never mind the marriage.' This links to Day's later research (see pp????), which promotes the idea of 'believing in belonging'.

EVALUATION

This research is based on a very small sample selected in such a way that no claims can be made about representativeness nor generalisations made to larger populations. Nevertheless, the great virtue of this type of research is that it allows respondents to speak for themselves and thus provides valuable insights that could form the basis of further research. It suggests that the importance of religion in people's lives is changing in ways that are not fully captured in either the secularisation or believing without belonging arguments.