

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Secular Weddings in Canada: An Examination of a Humanist Response to the Evolution of Marriage

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Despite increasing societal secularization, little research has been undertaken on the needs of non-religious people to engage in marriage ceremony or the means by which such needs are met. Using a jurisdictional scan, focus groups, and an on-line survey, this exploratory survey examines the provision for and use of secular legal marriage in Canada's regions from a humanist perspective. It is postulated that marriage ceremonies have persisted among the non-religious due to needs to authenticate or recognize transitional changes to the self, but these needs have been met through ad hoc strategies as opposed to a uniform demand for humanist services. Implications for humanist organizations are discussed along with recommendations for further research.

While humanist organizations legally solemnize weddings in at least eight industrialized countries worldwide,¹ this service is available in only one Canadian province despite nearly a quarter of the Canadian population (23.9%) self-identifying as non-religious (StatisticsCanada, 2011). As will be shown using demographic data, most of these people will legally marry in the course of their lives, but while their belief systems differ from those of the religious in some ways, the adequacy of ceremonial services for this population has not been well examined. This paper examines the humanist response to this changing demographic.²

Situating the Present Discourse on Marriage

In 1908, Van Gennep (2011/1960) described marriage as a "rite of passage" marking a transition from adolescence "enabling the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined" (p. 3). These "well-defined" positions had been changing. During the Industrial Revolution men were driven from feudal agricultural and cottage industries to work in factories and mills for wages. Whereas marriage had previously involved male-female partnerships in work and childrearing, ordinary men now found themselves in roles that limited daily contact with their children while engaging in work that was alienating (Marx, 1959). With Napoleon's use of the invention of the nation to justify universal conscription, qualities such as respect for military hierarchy and the repression of emotions became identified with

"maleness" (Sanchez-Lopez, Cuellar-Flores, Liminana, & Corbalan, 2012).

Women's roles within the family were also evolving. Although the Industrial Revolution initially promoted the role of women as primary caregivers replacing the now absent father, the development of machines that replaced male muscle power laid the seeds for female participation in the wage economy (Nathanson & Young, 2015). While the recognition of married women's right to own property independent of their husbands in Connecticut (1809), Massachusetts (1818), Upper Canada (1859) and elsewhere represented an advance for equality, Shammas (1994) argued that propertied women were better off under the earlier "equity law" that obligated men to care for their wives to a level befitting their social class. Nonetheless, a normative model remained of marriage as a heterosexual union in which women were in charge of "hearth and home" differing to their husbands on financial matters. Although Becker (1973) demonstrated that economically such a man and woman both gained from marrying as compared to remaining single, the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement³ viewed such marriage as a mechanism for the oppression of women (Carbone & Brinig, 1990; Ferree, 1990; Mohr, 1984). Canadian divorce laws were liberalized in 1968 and again in 1985 with increased entitlements to property, assets, and child support for women choosing this alternative. Fault, defined as the failure to comply with the terms of the marriage contract, was abolished as a prerequisite for divorce, in effect "denying the existence of an obligation to remain married" (Carbone & Brinig, 1990, p. 955). One of the contractual obligations of marriage had involved the provision of sex, but in 1983 legislation the Canadian government

explicitly allowed women to charge their husbands with sexual assault.⁴

As divorce rates spiked, new laws were passed granting common-law co-habitation marital status⁵ for the purposes of taxation and the equitable division of property. In addition, laws were passed in all Canadian jurisdictions during the 1970s prohibiting discrimination in education and employment on the basis of one's sex and affirmative action programs were implemented to ensure women had the opportunity to access career opportunities formerly dominated by men.

Data tracking increased rates of cohabitation outside of marriage has been used to support a thesis that the institution of marriage is in decline in Canada (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004); however, as can be seen in **Figure 1** by 2011 individuals aged 64 were as likely to have been legally married at least once as their age peers three decades earlier. This data is consistent with Cherlin's (1981) finding that in the United States, "More than 90 percent of the members of every birth cohort on record (dating back to the 1800s) have eventually married" (p. 10). As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the onset of first marriage has been delayed by approximately six years for both sexes. This delay has been replaced by an increase in common-law unions particularly among the 15 to 29 age cohort, with the result that the number of adults who were in either a common-law union or a legal marriage in 2011 closely matched the number 30 years earlier (Milan, 2013). Using data from 3,132 Canadian undergraduate students, Bouichard and Lachance-Grzela (2016) demonstrated that "emerging adults" from non-traditional families (defined as common-law, single parent and non-heterosexual) demonstrated more positive attitudes toward cohabitation and child rearing outside of marriage and greater expectations of relationship success than a control group of peers raised in traditional families.

According to the Pew Research Center (2013), the number of adults declaring themselves to be of no religion increased from approximately 4% in 1971 to 12.3% in 1991. By 2011 that figure increased further to 23.9% (StatisticsCanada, 2011). Since 94% of adults during this period eventually married, we can conclude that the majority of the non-religious also married. We would expect that many were married by civil authorities appointed for that purpose.⁶ In five Canadian provinces marriage ceremonies are offered to the non-religious by an interfaith organization called the "Clergy Support Memorial Fellowship" (McKibbin, 2016). Operating under the brand name "All Seasons Weddings" and accepting clergy ordained by any organization other than the Universal Life Church (ULC),⁷ this organization offers to perform weddings for Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, secular humanists, aboriginals and followers of various "Earth religions."

Since its inception in 1959 the Universal Life Church (ULC) in U.S. America has ordained, automatically on registration, more than 20 million ministers, mostly for the purpose of performing one or two weddings for friends or relatives (Hoesly, 2015). In a survey of people married by the ULC (N = 207), 64% self-identified as humanist, 47% as secular, 37% as agnostic, 32% as apathetic/indifferent, and 27% as atheists. After interviewing both couples and ministers Hoesly (2015) concluded:

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

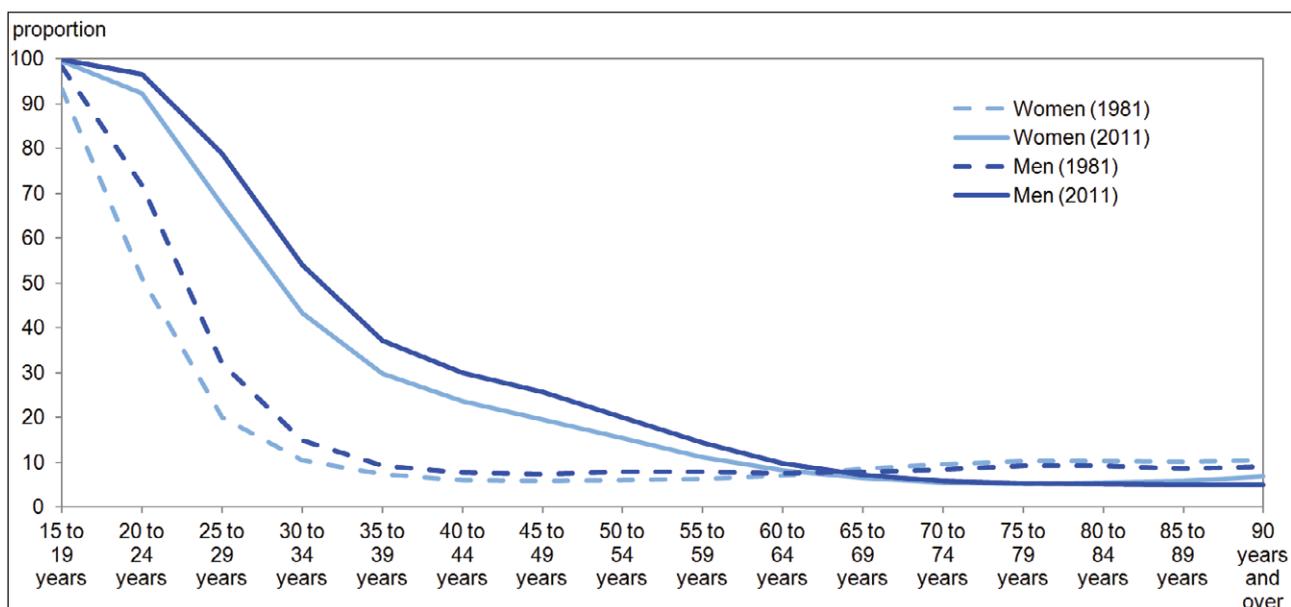


Figure 1: The percentage of people who have never been legally married in Canada by age for 1981 and 2011 (Source: Statistics Canada, 2011).

in a church wedding or to civil officials who could perform a secular ceremony in a bureaucratic office building. (p. 8)

A qualitative study of 21 random urban North American heterosexual couples (Humble, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2008) illustrated a diversity in relationship styles and planning. Six of the weddings were deemed (by the grooms) to be “for the bride” and it was the brides who, along with female relatives, did the wedding planning and preparation. These weddings were defined as “traditional.” Five weddings involved joint planning and control (although in one the male did most of the preparative work), and were deemed to be “egalitarian.” The remaining ten weddings involved the active participation by the male but with the female dominant and were termed “transitional.” Increasingly, marriage has also involved couples who are homosexual, bisexual and transsexual (Alderson, 2004; Baker & Elizabeth, 2012; Kimport, 2014). The spectrum of gender relationships, sexualities and ideological/spiritual beliefs has resulted in increased pressures for individualized service. This paper focuses on how Canadian humanists⁸ have responded to such needs.

Method

Following a participatory action model aimed at fostering community development (Bulman & Hayes, 2011; O’Toole, Aaron, Chin, Horowitz, & Tyson, 2003; Viswanathan, et al., 2004), the researcher and community of interest represented by the HC board co-constructed the research objectives and procedures used in this study. The researcher in this instance is an academic who had received training as a humanist officiant in 2003, but practiced as a licensed marriage commissioner in a province where HC is not recognized for the purpose of marriage solemnization. After reviewing an initial background paper that was posted on the HC website,⁹ the following research questions were co-constructed:

1. How do humanists meet the ceremonial needs of humanists seeking weddings in jurisdictions that lack a secular organization mandated to perform such ceremonies?
2. Are there unmet needs for ceremony in those jurisdictions?
3. Are there strategies that HC may employ in meeting the needs of the non-religious outside of Ontario for wedding ceremonies?

The research began with interviews of local knowledgeable individuals about relevant legal and historical conditions affecting the provision of marriages in their respective provinces and the local histories and current practices humanist response to those conditions.¹⁰ The existence of local organizations who could potentially host focus groups was also identified.¹¹

The second stage of this study involved the use of focus groups organized by local humanist groups in cities outside of Ontario. All six local humanist organizations identified by the provincial scan were invited to host focus

group meetings. Three local humanist groups (in Victoria, BC; Vancouver, BC; and Winnipeg MB) agreed to do so. Focus group discussions were open-ended using guiding questions.¹² Participant responses were recorded by the author who also served as the facilitator for two smaller groups and as a co-facilitator for a larger focus group of nine. Seven females and 10 males participated in these sessions. The discussions were recorded on flip chart paper or in written notes. Underlying themes were identified by the researcher following a subsequent analysis of these records.

A third portion of this research consisted of an online survey¹³ sent to 772 people on the HC membership and supporters list. The HC membership at the time was 272, two thirds of which resided in the province of Ontario. The results were tabulated by *SurveyMonkey*.

Results

Provincial Scan of the Provision for Humanist Weddings

Ontario couples may choose either a religious or civil marriage. Civil weddings are performed by judges, justices of the peace or an authorized municipal clerk. The provision of civil weddings has been delegated to local municipalities who may designate specific days a clerk at city hall is available for a short prescribed service.¹⁴

In 1996, a local urban group, The Humanist Association of Ottawa, applied for and received recognition to solemnize weddings under a section of the Ontario Marriage Act governing religions, but then transferred their authority to HC.¹⁵ Prospective officiants are required to complete an initial two day training course and attend yearly conventions for the purpose of professional development. In 2016, 48 HC officiants were listed as registered religious officials in the provincial data base. HC officiants conducted 626 weddings in 2014 and another 621 in 2015. A separate organization, the Ontario Humanist Society began performing legal marriages with its own licensed officiants in 2009, and in 2016 they had 23 registered celebrants.¹⁶

Nova Scotia does not have provincially mandated marriage commissioners. Since this province is also without a secular organization that provides legally recognized ceremonies, the non-religious have fewer options in obtaining a legal marriage than couples in most other jurisdictions. During the course of this study, three people were identified as wanting to provide humanist ceremonies in *Nova Scotia* with two already licensed in *Ontario*. One of these had applied for a “one time” special license to officiate a wedding for a specified couple. It is possible for a national organization that provides wedding services in another Canadian jurisdiction to be recognized to provide weddings in *Nova Scotia* providing such an organization has a local membership of at least 25 that meets regularly for the purpose of “worship.”

Quebec, like *Nova Scotia*, is without marriage commissioners. Betrothed secular couples rely on an assortment of judicial and civil officials. Two members of the Association Humaniste du Quebec (AHQ) are graduates of the HC officiant training program. Using HC’s experience

in Ontario as a precedent, the Quebec association applied to legally solemnize weddings in 2011, but the application was denied on the grounds that humanism is not a religion. The Association was advised this position could be reversed if their application was supported by theologians connected to a recognized school of divinity. The association has appealed this decision under provincial human rights legislation.

Manitoba. Aspiring marriage commissioners apply to the province's Department of Vital Statistics who allocate commissions on the basis of area quotas. Although commissioners are allowed to charge a maximum of \$75.00 (CDN) for the service of registering the marriage, additional fees may be charged for marriage preparation and travel. Two such marriage commissioners are members of Humanist, Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba. Neither of these commissioners has taken officiant training through HC.

Saskatchewan's marriage regulations mirror those in Manitoba with the exception that its marriage commissioners are not allowed to charge an extra fee to prepare an individualized ceremony. Although HC has individual members in the province, there is no affiliated local humanist group. One HC trained officiant practises as a local marriage commissioner.

Alberta. The metropolitan centers of Calgary and Edmonton are home to several humanist and atheist groups, but none had applied to provide marriage services at the time of this study. The province does have a system of marriage commissioners who provide civil weddings. Marriage commissioners are allocated by the province using a quota system, and they may charge up to \$75.00 for providing a ceremony and registering the required documents.

British Columbia applicants to become marriage commissioners face an initial screening but, as with other provinces, receive no provincially mandated training. Successful applicants are placed on a waiting list awaiting a vacancy in their geographic area. B.C. marriage commissioners may not have other paid employment; and, since they may charge \$75.00 per wedding inclusive of wedding preparation, this effectively restricts the avocation to those who are retired or dependent on spousal support.

A metropolitan Vancouver organization, the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA), applied to the province's Vital Statistics Department to solemnize marriages in 2013. Their application was denied on the grounds that their organization did not constitute a religion. The organization is considering appealing that decision on the grounds that it discriminates against non-religious people or lobbying the provincial government for separate legislation governing marriage solemnization by non-religious organizations (Bushfield, Bell, & Hayes, 2017). Groups in Victoria and Kamloops have expressed interest in pursuing the certification of humanist officiants in their cities. Similar to provisions in other provinces, a national organization that has solemnized marriages in at least one other jurisdiction for a minimum of five years

may be recognized for that purpose providing there is an existent provincial membership of at least 100.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus groups were organized by local humanist groups in three cities. Participants were e-mailed copies of the preliminary discussion paper¹⁷ in advance of each meeting. The following summaries highlight the ensuing discussion in each of the groups:

Vancouver. This focus group consisted of nine participants who were members of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA) serving the greater Vancouver area. One participant estimated the group receives about six unsolicited requests for marriages annually even though it does not provide this service. A second participant added, "We refer most of these people to two marriage commissioners, but they are not really humanists, in fact one is quite 'New Age.'" A third person explained, "We really need an officiant or celebrant or whatever you call them, who reflects our views, for example, no sexism. None of this 'love, honor and obey'. . . It's more than non-religion, it's a worldview."

The facilitator asked if this worldview constituted a creed. The second participant suggested, "We can abide by humanist values, such as valuing gender and racial equality. . . these can be reflected in ceremonies without it being a religious creed." Several participants opined that couples wanting little or no ceremony could continue to utilize the provincially sanctioned commissioners.

Reflecting on this group's failed application to solemnize marriages, one participant said the development of humanist marriage celebrants in British Columbia would probably require a change of legislation. Another elaborated, "There are lots of people unhappy with the (marriage) regulations. . . humanists, aboriginals, different minorities. Their needs are not being served. Maybe we should try ethnic outreach and link up with others unhappy with the legislation."

Training existent marriage commissioners in humanist ceremony was described as "stop gap." Training humanists in ceremony and having them apply to the provincial licensing authority to become commissioners was seen as cumbersome as the appointments are not automatic and are subject to provincial directives. "There is probably lots we could be doing (about marriage solemnization)," concluded yet another participant, "but it seems like other issues, like doctor assisted suicide or homelessness or the environment have more immediacy."

Victoria. Three humanists participated in this focus group. One, the president of the Victoria Humanist Association, explained that a survey of members completed the year previously revealed humanist officiating to be a low priority. It was explained that the membership is quite elderly, past the age when marriage is a usual consideration.

The other two members of this focus group expressed an active interest in humanist ceremony. One said that she had investigated becoming a marriage commissioner "this very year," but decided, "I could not pursue this. It's not

just that you can only charge \$75.00 per wedding; it's that you cannot have another job.¹⁸ No one can live on that, besides I have a career."

The third member of this group had been an ordained minister but became a marriage commissioner when he left religion. "At one time I was doing 300 weddings a year and most of them, I would say, were for humanists. But I found the (B.C.) regulations too restrictive, what you can do, what you can charge, that you cannot have another job. So I gave up my commission." He now operates as a ceremonial consultant explaining, "I have done weddings where I bring in a marriage commissioner to do the paperwork, but mostly I do funerals now."

Winnipeg. Five members of the Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba (HAAM) met with the researcher in Winnipeg. Two of the participants were marriage commissioners licensed by the province. Unlike British Columbia, Manitoba marriage commissioners may charge for additional services required to develop unique and individualized ceremonies. Thus these marriage commissioners may administer a minimal rote ceremony at provincial rates, or they may construct an individualized service that more accurately reflects the values of the couples involved at enhanced rates. One participant who was not a commissioner explained, "Basically, humanists can have the ceremony they want. We are happy with this service, and there is no need for our organization to administer or oversee these weddings." Another added, "Ceremony is important, not just weddings but funerals, and naming ceremonies and de-conversion ceremonies. As things stand now, we can provide all of that."

One of the marriage commissioners said they face isolation, "We have little contact with other humanist groups because of the distances involved. Humanist Canada could help by linking marriage commissioners with each other, providing workshops and mentoring."

Focus groups not held. Unsuccessful attempts were made to organize humanist focus groups in four metropolitan

centers. Individuals from two separate organizations in Calgary, Alberta, said the provision of humanist marriage had never been a high priority in their city. Two members of a humanist group in Edmonton, Alberta expressed support for this research, but the organization failed to respond. Communicating through a member who sits on the HC board, Quebec humanists indicated that they would not be ready to answer the focus group questions circulated until they had developed a legal strategy with respect to their unsuccessful application to solemnize marriages. Finally, unsuccessful attempts were made to locate an active humanist group in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Survey Results

Twenty-two individuals responded to the survey. Half (11) were over the age of 60, 8 were in the range 40–60, two were age 20–40, and one did not indicate age. Thirteen were male and seven identified as female. They hailed from the following provinces: Ontario (15), British Columbia (3), Nova Scotia (2), New Brunswick (1) and Alberta (1). Unexpectedly, 5 respondents representing 23% of the sample indicated that they were Ontario humanist officiants contributing to the overrepresentation of that province in these results.¹⁹ Respondent answers to questions on whether humanist officiants should offer individualized wedding ceremonies and marriages without ceremonies are summarized in **Table 1**.

Every respondent agreed there is a need for individualized marriage ceremonies reflecting the couples' values and worldview but 15 (68%) added that these ceremonies must be consistent with humanist values. One participant reflected a general consensus:

Humanist life ceremonies should be open to being tailored to individual needs and worldviews within the broad philosophical framework that humanism allows. However, ceremonial requests that

Table 1: Survey Responses as to whether Humanists Should Provide Individualized Wedding Ceremonies and Services to Couples Requesting No Ceremony.

	Should humanists provide individualized ceremonies?	Should humanist officiants provide marriages without ceremonies?
Ontario N = 15	Yes = 14 (93%) No = 0	Yes = 5 (33%) No = 8 (53%)
Outside Ontario N = 7	Yes = 7 (100%)	Yes = 5 (71%) No = 1 (14%)
Male N = 13	Yes = 13 (100%)	Yes = 6 (46%) No = 4 (31%)
Female N = 8	Yes = 7 (88%) No = 0	Yes = 4 (50%) No = 4 (50%)
Age 60 and over N = 11	Yes = 9 (88%) No = 0	Yes = 5 (45%) No = 3 (27%)
Under Age 60 N = 10	Yes = 10 (100%)	Yes = 5 (50%) No = 5 (50%)

* Not all respondents indicated their sex or age.

reflect values or worldviews that directly contradict humanist principles (e.g. rejection of freedom of conscience, inequality of gender or race, supernaturalism, etc) should not be accommodated.

Diversity of opinion surfaced as to whether humanist officiants should accommodate couples who want a legal marriage but do not want a ceremony. Five respondents from outside Ontario said humanist officiants should accommodate such requests with only one opposed. The majority of the Ontario respondents (53%) would deny such requests. Those who would accede emphasized freedom of choice and self-determination. One respondent asked rhetorically “What is a marriage anyway?” Four individuals including two officiants said they would encourage the couple to have vows and a minimal ceremony while affirming the couples’ right to decide. Those in the “no camp” said there are other civil authorities such as judges, mayors and marriage commissioners who could accommodate requests for no ceremony. Two officiants said they discuss the importance of ceremony with reticent couples.

Respondents were also asked to outline their role in the development of humanist officiating in their areas. Three Ontario respondents said the question was not applicable to their province, but two officiants from the province said there was a need to increase the program’s visibility. Another said legislation should be changed to reduce the confusion between them and clergy. Non-officiants from Ontario cited the need to increase visibility and establish appropriate humanist venues to hold such events.

One respondent from outside Ontario declared his willingness to seek registration as a “quasi-church” while another said he had invited an Ontario officiant to perform a wedding ceremony in his province so as to set a local precedent. A third individual cited a need for pre-wedding counselling, but a fourth said the government should stop privileging marriage.

When asked to list what additional ceremonies humanist officiants should perform, 12 respondents (55%) listed funerals. Six respondents also listed birthing or naming ceremonies, but all of these were from Ontario and were under the age of 60. Individual respondents mentioned wedding vow renewals, anniversaries, educational achievement and “milestones.”

Discussion

McTaggart (1994) contrasted the approach of Dutch humanists who emphasize service delivery including non-theistic ceremonies, counselling, and educational programs with that of Canadian humanists who were described as “abolitionist. . . offering nothing in the way of humanist education or non-theistic services, either to their own members or to the larger community of Religious Nones” (p. 216).²⁰ Since his finding that the Canadian humanist movement eschewed ceremony and other direct services, two humanist organizations have been licensed to provide weddings under a section of Ontario’s marriage act governing religions. The lack of participation by several invited humanist organizations may indi-

cate a division within the movement on this issue that was masked by the self-selection process used. This study should be seen, therefore, as an exploration into the experience of humanists who are predisposed to favour the provision secular ceremonies by their organizations. This discussion begins with consideration of participant responses and concludes with a more general discussion on why non-religious people continue to seek marriage.

The Humanist Response to Marriage in Canada

The participants in this research agreed that humanism represents a distinct philosophy encompassing secularism, equality and diversity; and a majority (68% of survey respondents) volunteered that humanist officiants should not be compelled to conduct ceremonies that are not in accord with that philosophy. No one in either the online survey or in the focus groups disagreed with this view. Almost half of survey respondents (47%) would deny services to couples who wanted to marry without a ceremony, and this position received support in each focus group. Taking the view that a philosophically consistent non-theistic belief system coupled with a commitment to live an ethical life is constitutive of a “secular religion,” three humanist groups in the United States have registered as religious non-profit organizations (Blankholm, 2014).²¹ In suggesting their decision to deny the application of the AHQ the right to solemnize marriages could be reversed on the testimony of recognized theologians, Quebec authorities were allowing for such an interpretation, but such a strategy would not be without risk. As Pfeffer (1987) noted, the concept of a “secular religion” allows theists to challenge secular practice as a faith-based dogma.²² Consistent with similar concerns expressed at the Vancouver focus group, the British Columbia Human Rights Association is considering lobbying their provincial government for separate legislation governing the solemnization of marriage by non-religious organizations.

The first research question asked how humanists meet ceremonial marriage needs in jurisdictions lacking secular organizations mandated to perform such services. Humanists in only one such province (Manitoba) were satisfied that their ceremonial needs were met by member marriage commissioners. This result is likely related to provincial regulations that allow commissioners to charge for the individualization of ceremonies.

The second research question asked whether there were unmet needs for humanist ceremony. Unsatisfied with restrictive regulations, one British Columbia marriage commissioner gave up his commission to specialize in funerals. Members of another B.C. group expressed unhappiness with available options, but were unsuccessful in obtaining the legal right to solemnize marriages. While the need for humanist funerals and birthing ceremonies was mentioned by survey respondents and focus groups, and these activities are not limited by legislation, humanists provide these services only sporadically. While an extrapolation of the Ontario experience would imply that there are unmet needs for ceremony in other parts of Canada, the activities of humanists in those regions imply that such needs are not deeply felt.

With the important qualification that this research was not completed on betrothed couples, the picture that emerged is that the non-religious view their marriage as a personal, as opposed to political, issue. They survey the possible resources in their communities and develop wedding plans accordingly. In one province, they seek out humanist officiants in significant numbers. In other provinces they use marriage commissioners or other provincial designates. Canadian humanists have largely not served the ceremonial needs of the non-religious population.

On Why the Non-religious Seek Marriage

This paper identified gradual and accumulative changes to gender²³ within marriage occurring since the Industrial Revolution. In Canada these accumulative changes led to the removal of many of the economic and structural rules that had advantaged legal marriage: Divorces became easier to obtain, legally enshrined equality of opportunity in careers and advancement removed much of the economic necessity to marry, child support was broadened and expanded, and co-habitation was awarded similar tax advantages to those previously given legal marriage. It was reasonable to expect that these changes would lead to a decline in marriages. The marriage rate per 1,000 in Canada increased from 7.0 in 1961 to 8.9 in 1971 before dropping to 7.7 in 1981 and stabilizing at 4.4–4.7 from 2001 to 2008 (Milan, 2013).²⁴ The actual number of Canadian marriages performed annually has hovered around 155,000 (+/- 10,000) from 1993, but this occurred in the context of an increasing population. Changes to the marriage rate need to be interpreted cautiously because the statistic is dependent on the average age of first marriage, immigration patterns, aging demographics, and regional anomalies. The marriage rate in Canada's second largest province, Quebec, dropped below 3.0 at the turn of the century leading Le Bourdras and Lapierre-Adamcyk (2004) to declare that Quebec women had deserted marriage. Drawing on a national sample of 1,600 "mature singles" aged 29–64, Crompton (2005) found that 42% of the Quebec francophone population expected to never marry compared with 13% in the non-French speaking population in Canada. Unique historical factors such as Quebec's 1960s "Quiet Revolution" against Roman Catholic control may have precipitated this Quebec anomaly serving to skew national data.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, Canadians aged 65 in 2011 were as likely to have been married at least once as their age peers 30 years previously despite the increasing prevalence of common-law unions. This replicates Cherlin's (1981) finding that more than 90% of each birth cohort in U.S. America since the middle of the nineteenth century eventually married. While it is possible that those currently young and cohabitating may choose to never marry, as may be happening in Quebec, such a development would not be in keeping with historical trends.

Grimes (2000) noted "a resurgence of interest in the construction of rites of passage" (p. 3), and he suggested that the marriage rite into adulthood had been delayed. Arnett (2000) proposed a new pre-adult developmental stage he called "emerging adulthood" characterized as a period of

independent exploration between adolescence and young adulthood involving little normative pressure to enter marriage. He clarified, "Most young (North American) people in their twenties have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status – especially marriage and parenthood – and most of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood" (Arnett, 2015, p. 2). If marriage and parenthood are associated with adult status then some 16 year olds would be considered adults while others in their late 20s would not. In research on samples of adolescents, emerging adults and midlife adults, Arnett (2001) found that role transitions such as marriage were of low importance in self-definitions of adulthood.

The examples of ULC and "All Seasons Weddings" demonstrate a market for marriage ceremonies servicing the non-religious. While some people do marry for religious or social reasons, the "Canadian experiment" of reduced legal support for such unions in an increasingly secular population has not falsified Cherlin's (1981) dictum that most people would eventually marry. While some heterosexual couples may choose to never marry, same-sex marriages have become increasingly common (Humble, 2013; Kimport, 2014). As Cherlin (2005) subsequently noted, "Marriage has not faded away. In fact, given the many alternatives to marriage now available, what may be more remarkable is not the decline in marriage but its persistence" (p. 34). In a subsequent editorial Cherlin (2013) opined that marriage was now a "capstone" that constitutes a declaration of a successfully constructed life.

Since common law unions predominate in the younger cohort, legal marriage cannot be viewed as a prerequisite to cohabitation (although some couples make this personal choice), nor is it an economic necessity for most women. Since social stigma associated with non-traditional unions has also been reduced (Bouichard & Lachance-Grzela, 2016), and it no longer serves as a "rite of passage" into adulthood, we must consider the possibility that marriage satisfies a psychological need that is operative independent of social and religious pressure. If the self is defined as a culturally mediated understanding of who we are and our place in the world (Leary & Tangney, 2003; Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Mead, 1934/2003), then transitions mark substantive changes to that self. Such transitions need support in the form of evidence or verification to be felt to be true (Bridges, 2001; Robertson & Conrad, 2016; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The commitment to enter into a lifelong relationship involves such transitioning. Aron & Aron (2012) explained:

The inclusion-of-other-in-the-self principle emphasizes that one way in which people seek to expand the self is through close relationships because in a close relationship the other's resources, perspectives, and identities are experienced to some extent, as their own: that is, the other is to some extent included in the self. (p. 190)

Transitions involving the incorporation of another person's well-being into one's own self may be reinforced or authenticated by the mutual declaration of public vows

that have meaning for the couples involved (Robertson, 2016). By reducing self-descriptive narratives to elemental units of culture and then setting these “memes” in relation to each other according to their connotative, affective and behavioural implications held in the mind of the individual, Robertson (2010, 2014) created two dimensional representations or “maps” of the self. Using such a method, it would be possible to track hypothesized transitions to selves in developing and committed relationships. Such maps could be extended to account for contributive social factors associated with the impetus to marry.

Any psychological explanations of marriage would need to account for the apparent anomalous situation in Quebec. If there is a human need for ceremony, and if the Quebecois have not found some other means for meeting this need, then their lower marriage rate coupled with a higher expectancy of not marrying should affect the stability of their mating relationships and the structure of their selves in some ways. A need for more research is indicated.

Notes

- ¹ Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Norway, Ireland, Scotland, the Netherlands, and 33 U. S. states.
- ² This research was commissioned by Humanist Canada (HC), one of two humanist groups solemnizing weddings in the province of Ontario, to investigate the state of humanist weddings in those parts of the country not serviced by its officiant program. The author was added to the board of Humanist Canada in 2014 with a specific mandate to undertake this research.
- ³ Similar to the U.S. civil rights movement on which it was based, “Women’s Liberation” sought equality with men in educational, vocational, and other pursuits; whereas modern feminism postulates that there are unique feminine ways of knowing and being that must be accommodated.
- ⁴ Bill C-127 abolished the crime of rape, replacing it with “sexual assault.” Although the Bill is presented in sex-neutral language, an internet search failed to uncover any convictions of a wife sexually assaulting her husband.
- ⁵ Couples need to have cohabitated for one year to be considered married in Canada with specific provisions varying by jurisdiction.
- ⁶ This statistic would require that couples declare that they were non-religious on civil marriage forms. The author was unable to find any provincial governments that published this data.
- ⁷ ULC ministers are not authorized to solemnize marriages in any jurisdiction in Canada.
- ⁸ “Humanist” is defined here as an atheist having a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings exercising evidentiary based critical thinking coupled with compassion for others.
- ⁹ See: <https://www.humanistcanada.ca/images/docs/Humanist%20Love%20&%20Marriage.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ The names of these individuals were supplied by HC and were very often members of the organization. HC was unable to supply the researcher with informants from some smaller provinces and territories resulting in their exclusion from this scan.
- ¹¹ HC is primarily a direct membership organization. At the time of this study only two local humanist groups outside of Ontario were affiliated with it.
- ¹² Guide questions included consideration of the following: the perceived need for individualized humanist ceremonies and how such needs, if identified, are met; accommodation of couples not wanting a marriage ceremony by humanist officiants; and other life events that need ceremony.
- ¹³ This questionnaire paralleled the focus group guide questions (see Footnote 12).
- ¹⁴ Some Ontario municipalities have designated “marriage commissioners” who may individualize secular weddings held at diverse locations. These commissioners advertise their services and charge fees (some municipalities set the rate at \$300 per wedding) suitable to conducting a business. They report to a municipal clerk in charge of weddings.
- ¹⁵ According to the then president of the local group, provincial authorities had suggested this transfer because the Ottawa humanist group lacked the resources to train, monitor and sustain an officiant program on an on-going basis.
- ¹⁶ By way of comparison, Canada’s largest religious sect, the Roman Catholic Church, had 2,550 clergy authorized to solemnize marriages on the same provincial registry.
- ¹⁷ See: <https://www.humanistcanada.ca/images/docs/Humanist%20Love%20&%20Marriage.pdf>.
- ¹⁸ British Columbia is the only jurisdiction with this regulation; see the “provincial scan.”
- ¹⁹ Ontario’s share of the Canadian population was approximately 38% at the time of the study.
- ²⁰ McTaggart (1994) estimated membership in the Dutch Verbond was 16,000 at the time as compared to the Humanist Association of Canada (now Humanist Canada) with fewer than 200. He attributed, in part, the greater success of the Dutch humanists in attracting members to their willingness to provide direct services to members.
- ²¹ The American Ethical Union, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association.
- ²² Humanists and other secularists typically justify their beliefs on the basis of science and reason instead of “revealed truth.” By equating these beliefs with religion they may undermine their internal logic justifying those beliefs while giving added weight to theists who argue that their religiously held beliefs should be given equal weight in secular institutions, as for example, the teaching of creationism in science classes.
- ²³ During the 1960s, the term “gender” was appropriated from the study of grammar and defined as referring to culturally mediated learned sex-roles. As used here, it is an evolving cultural construct potentially resulting in a plurality of male and female genders.

²⁴ Statistics Canada stopped collecting this data on marriage effective 2008.

Competing Interests

LHR is a member of the board of Humanist Canada on a voluntary basis.

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