

Arthur Dobrin D.S.W. psychologytoday.com

Am I Right?

What's Wrong With This Religious Wedding?

Couples marry even though they don't believe in the religion.

Posted Dec 07, 2017

In a short story I teach in both my undergraduate and graduate classes at Hofstra University, the main characters, Marcus and Thea, decide to hold their wedding ceremony in a church even though neither of them is especially religious.

A question I ask students is whether they think it is right for the couple to have gotten their blessing from an institution to which they were largely indifferent.

Here are two typical responses:

“I think it was right for them to get married in a religious ceremony because even if religion wasn't particularly important to them, they knew it was important to their families. They wanted to uphold the tradition, as well as honor their families. There is nothing wrong with this in my opinion because how they wanted to get married was their own decision and they seemed to be a very happy couple. They weren't forced to marry this way, this was just the way that must have felt right for them.”

“There's no problem with getting married via religious ceremony for the sake of pleasing the people who raised you, as long as it isn't against your beliefs entirely. Thea and Marcus were not particularly religious but they also had nothing against religion or their parents. I also don't think a wedding ceremony dictates the marriage.”

These responses, and hundreds of others like them, point to the notion that religion isn't about belief or faith but tradition. What's more, it is often not taking part in the tradition because one wants to carry on those connections with the past but because they want to please others.

I understand my students' reactions well. I did the same years ago when I got married. My fiancé and I had a religious ceremony and even verbally agreed to something that both of us knew we weren't going to fulfill. This did it because it was easier than bucking family pressure. We thought this was a small price to pay for pleasing our parents.

With the benefit of hindsight, I realize how wrong we were. A clergyman performing a religious service for us was a shame. I now also realize how disrespectful it was to him and to the religion for which he stood.

If you understand religion in which tradition is subsidiary, not primary, then there is a problem. Religions rest upon a set of beliefs and ask its adherents to follow guidelines that promote ethical living.

Conscience and goodwill are intrinsic to religion but that's not what my students understand. They find it acceptable to participate in a ritual that is meaningless to them—for the sake of pleasing their families.

But religious ceremonies ask participants to enunciate promises that are meant to be binding. When they are uttered by the couple, they are meant to be truthful statements regarding one's beliefs and intentions. It is ironic that in a setting in which honesty and integrity are supposed to be paramount instead become occasions for fudging, deception and sometimes outright lies.

The desire to please one's family is admirable, but if doing so means being hypocritical regarding one's religious convictions, the ceremony itself is reduced to merely a show. This is not what most clergies intend and is probably not what most who go through the motions without the content mean. But when this is done repeatedly, as I suspect it is, and when a few find it troubling, we are witnessing one more step in reducing religion from its rightful place as a center for ethical living to a lesser place that is something that further erodes a society that doesn't honor integrity very highly.

My response

Too often in society religion is about tradition and nobody has any regard for principles. It is soft bigotry to refuse to take a religious vow seriously even if the religion is just manmade. A religion is about being taken seriously. I think church

weddings in conservative Christian Churches insult the victims of the degrading teachings these religions often have about women and marriage. Catholicism lets 14 year old girls be married. The fact remains that many people who read their Bibles and know their history is that "God's word" does indeed fail to condemn child sex abuse in marriage relating to child brides. There are condemnations of bestiality and adultery and gay sex and no mention of the respect due to the sexual innocence of a child. Silence is consent anyway. But silence is more consent in a holy book which claims the right to be obeyed as the word of God and which encourages people to see that they must obey the book just because it says they must do it. Those biblical cultures did accept men having sex with girls whose bodies were not ready for sex or having babies. Men married female children. There are several clues in the Bible that a man is allowed to molest the child he "marries." The child at least should have the right to get away from the husband who raped her and abused her and who could divorce her to get his hands on a new child bride. Jesus reinforced these doctrines by saying that a girl cannot divorce her husband or she becomes an adulteress if she weds another. What is worse is he was being hypothetical for women did not have a right to divorce in his society. Calling her an adulteress was abusive in itself and was virtually calling for her murder for the Jewish God had decreed death by stoning for adulteresses. (And Jesus made no attempt to do away with stoning in his ministry. The adulteress who was brought to him for stoning was brought to him as a test but even then he said she should be stoned but only by worthy accusers. He did not stone her for it was not his place and it was never done by one person. And it was a test anyway.) I repeat: the fact remains that these women were forced into marriage, were too young as well and had every right and perhaps the duty to leave their husbands.