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MINISTER FOR A DAY - ONLINE ORDINATION AND THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen the rise of a new phenomenon - online ordination. It can be accepted that much of this burgeoning industry is a financial scam, but is that the whole story? The very existence of online ordination raises questions. Why do people feel the need for a "minister" to officiate at weddings? If they are sufficiently estranged from the religious sphere that no bona fide minister of religion will marry them, and if secular alternatives are readily available, why make use of this service? This article presents an overview and typology of online ordination services and places them in the context of the development of religion in contemporary society, and the development of society itself.

Key Words: Online ordination, Marriage, Wedding, Church-state relations, Secularisation.

> *Tom Hanks can officiate your wedding! The Bridge of Spies star told Extra that it cost him less than $40 to become ordained to officiate Allison Williams' wedding to Ricky Van Veen earlier this month. "Here's what I did," Hanks recalled. "I studied the ministry for over $35. And if you want to call me the Right Reverend Tom Hanks, I think you should". "I'm for rent," the funnyman, 59, joked. "If you can afford the honorarium, I'll be there for ya"[1].*

Marriage has been in the news lately with the rapid public acceptance of equal rights for homosexual persons to get married and the promulgation of enabling legislation in a number of countries. The debate has not been on marriage as a (hopefully) lifelong partnership between two people, though. It has centred on the specific act of getting married. Almost unnoticed in the commotion there has been another change happening in that act, though. It is not about "who gets married to whom?", but about "who declares them married?".

Even in supposedly traditional religious circles, we see exceptions and innovations in this regard: Reiss[2], for example, reports on a wedding officiated by a Rabbi and two Catholic Priests. In 2010, Chelsea Clinton, daughter of ex-President Bill Clinton and Current presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton was married in a ceremony co-officiated by a Methodist minister and a rabbi[3]. The wedding was denounced in 2016 by Israeli Tourism Minister Yariv Levin, himself a secular Jew, as a sign of the decline of Reform Judaism:

> Assimilation is taking place on a vast scale. They're not even tracking this properly in their communities. It's evidenced by the fact that a man who calls himself a Reform rabbi stands there with a priest and officiates at the wedding of the daughter of Hillary Clinton and no one condemns it and so it gets legitimized[4].

Beyond the bounds of religious tradition, however, more radical events are occurring. There is an increasing trend of people choosing to be married by a friend, a mentor, or a colleague who became a minister for a day. Websites have appeared that give legal cover to the occasion by ordaining such individuals. Welcome to the world of online ordination.

The wedding as ritual entrance-point into marriage is a rite of passage in almost all cultures[5], and in contemporary western society the custom, and legal requirement, is that a duly appointed official represents the state and oversees the transition of two people from being isolated individuals to being legally united. This custom has become so deeply engrained in western society that it seems to be beyond questioning. Unless you have physically appeared in front of a state-sanctioned official, filled in the paperwork and declared your transition in front of witnesses,

you are not married, merely "living together", "co-habiting", or "shacking up". The wedding ceremony brings about a qualitative shift in the way two people are expected to interact, and in how the rest of society will see them.

But who is this state-sanctioned official? In most European countries that trace their legal system to the *Code Napoléon*, the state itself supplies the official. The actual position of the marriage officer in non-wedding situations varies: he or she may be a judge, a specialized municipal official, or a notary public, depending on the country involved. Those who are religious are free to hold a supplementary religious ceremony that, for all its spiritual meaning, does not carry much legal weight. In the Netherlands, for example,

> Only a civil marriage is legally valid. A church ceremony alone is insufficient. A wedding in the Church cannot take place before a civil wedding with the registrar[6].

In other countries, the pendulum has swung the other way and the state has completely abdicated the wedding ceremony to religious interests. Israel is the most prominent example here[7]. But even in Israel, the state needs to make provision for the recognition of marriages contracted outside its borders, which has led to a lucrative wedding industry on the island of Cyprus where non-religious and interreligious Israeli (and Lebanese) couples flock to get married[8].

In countries with an Anglophone legal and cultural heritage, secular marriage officials exist as well, and it is possible to enter into an entirely secular marriage by engaging the services of a justice of the peace or another suitably qualified government official.[9] In some California counties, it is even possible to be deputized as a Deputy Marriage Commissioner just for the day of the wedding[10].

But the Anglophone state has also outsourced the wedding ceremony to religious professionals, giving the "church wedding" an equal legal status with the "city hall wedding". We are painting with a broad brush here, and it is easy enough to find exceptions on either side, but mostly these are the patterns we see in western society today: the entanglement of state and religion exists on a continuum from total domination by either religion or state, with most societies somewhere in the centre of the continuum.

The Anglophone state has historically not released its control over the appointment of marriage officers completely, though. In South Africa, for example, one needs a letter of recommendation from one's religious organization, and then one has to pass an examination on the legal requirements for conducting a wedding. Indeed, South Africa combines the role of marriage officer with that of a Commissioner of Oaths, so that nearly every priest and minister, and a good proportion of the rabbis and

imams, in the country are able to provide minor legal services such as the authentication of documents.

If the state is to outsource the wedding ceremony to religion and its functionaries, immediately the question arises "*which* religious officials from *which* religion(s)?" Historically the state has restricted the organizations it was willing to empower in this regard. To use another example from South Africa, Paragraph 3 of the Marriage Act[11] states that,

> (1) The Minister and any officer in the public service authorized thereto by him may designate any minister of religion of, or any person holding a responsible position in, any religious denomination or organization to be, so long as he is such a minister or occupies such position, a marriage officer for the purpose of solemnizing marriages according to Christian, Jewish or Mohammedan [sic] rites or the rites of any Indian religion.[12]

When the Buddhist community first approached the authorities about the possibility of appointing Buddhists as marriage officers, they were informed that the government had no category for them and that they would have to register under the rubric "Indian religion", a category that had always been understood to mean Hinduism. The general trend, however, is for more religions to be allowed to function in this way. While the legislation allowed for "Mohammedan" marriage officers, bureaucratic fear of polygamy delayed their appointment until the first Muslim marriage officers in South Africa were appointed in 2014[13]. There are countries where Humanist organisations have obtained the authority to conduct weddings: In Scotland, the number of such weddings now rival those of traditional church weddings[14].

However, the state has largely allowed the religious organizations themselves to select the candidates for this position. If a Catholic priest wishes to register as a wedding officer, the state does not ask if he is a good, pious priest. As long as the Catholic Church certifies that he is indeed a priest by their standards, the state will normally acquiesce.

This reluctance on the part of the state to conduct in-depth investigations into the spiritual qualities of an applicant is a key factor in the rise of online ordination. Secularization has seen to it that the contemporary Anglophone state is ever less inclined to dabble in theology, or to declare firmly for or against a specific religious organization. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the United States of America, where a court once refused to consider the religious bona fides, or otherwise, of something as unorthodox as the Church of Body Modification[15]. Other societies, even other western societies, have no problem with essentially declaring a specific organisation to be a

fraudulent religion, as can be seen in the German government's long-running battle with Scientology[16].

But if the state is unwilling to consider whether a self-proclaimed church is really a religious organisation, it becomes possible for any group of people to declare itself a church, to ordain whomever they see fit, and to have those new ordainees request the state to acknowledge their status. Add to this the immense reach of the Internet and we have the new phenomenon of online ordination.

The history and scope of online ordination

No comprehensive history of online ordination has ever been written, but the phenomenon itself predates the possibility of being "online". We can generally accept that the incorporation of the Universal Life Church[17] in 1962 marks the beginning of the prehistory of the online phenomenon. This has been chronicled in the biography of its founder, Kirby J Hensley, although the fact that it was written by Hensley's co-founder Lewis Ashmore[18] makes it a suspect source of information.

For decades, the ULC operated by posting advertisements in popular magazines, alongside the "sea-monkeys" and "x-ray specs". With the rise of the Internet, however, it went online, which was reported to have happened around the year 1999[19], and soon spawned a variety of imitators[20].

Just how widespread is online ordination? My research initially, using the search engines Google and DuckDuckGo in January 2015, found thirty-six websites where one could apply for ordination[21]. There is some duplication involved here: The Universal Life Church (ULC), for one, has a branch in Canada[22] and also operates through branch organisations like the Universal Life Monastery[23] and the Universal Life Seminary[24].

Some of the websites disappeared before I was able to investigate them in depth (within six months of discovery), and a few organisations, while still active otherwise, stopped offering online ordinations during the course of my research during the year 2015. In this article I will respect the wishes of such defunct and ex-online ordaining organisations and not mention them by name[25]. No doubt new ones will have arisen since I wrote this.

The ULC actively courts popular legitimacy by posting the names of seventy-four celebrities whom they have ordained.[26] The list stretches across generations, from Mae West (1893-1980) to Stefani Germanotta, known professionally as Lady Gaga (b. 1986). It spans the religio-political spectrum too, since it includes both right-wing commentator Glenn Beck and the late founder of American Atheists, Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Most of the people named on this site are from the film (e.g. Paul Newman, Sharon Stone) and music (e.g. all four of the Beatles) industries, but it also

includes technology pundits John Dvorak and Leo Laporte, billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson and sports team owner Jerry Reinsdorf.

The fact that these famous people, or their estates, have agreed to have their names publicized in this context already points to a growing public acceptance of online ordination. Such people live in a reputation economy[27] and can afford drawn-out litigation. If they are happy to have their names put forward as ULC ministers, it indicates that being ordained, even it it was done online, enhances rather than diminishes their celebrity status.

In terms of the number of people affected by online ordination, it is worth noting that the current head of the Universal Life Church claims that the organization has ordained 18 million people since 1962[28] and that by 2007 they were ordaining 10 000 people a month, "twice as many as in 2000"[29]. To put that number in perspective, if 15 million of those ministers had actually officiated at just one wedding, then 30 million people have been married under the auspices of this organisation. If all 45 million of them were to gather one Sunday, they would be the second-largest religious group in the USA, beaten only by the Catholic Church.

But even the head of the ULC estimates that only 25% of its ordainees ever use their status[30], while the rest have themselves ordained as a fun, countercultural and subversive act[31], which gives us a more manageable 10 million or so people either ordained and active, or married by such an ordainee.

The ULC may be the oldest and best-known online ordination organisation, but it is not the only one. On its website[32], American Marriage Ministries claims to have ordained 25000 ministers since 2009 and numbers claimed by other organisations are in the same category of thousands rather than millions. There are indications that the numbers may have seen a recent increase with the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the USA[33] and the weakening of effective religious opposition to this[34]. If the legislative fight has been lost, churches can and do decline to officiate at gay weddings. Who then will conduct the ceremony if not a friend who got ordained online?

Another indication of the popularity of online ordination can be found in the number of wedding licenses issued:

> Wedding site *theknot.com* told the New York Times that a third of interviewees, married in 2009 and 2010, had been wedded by a friend or family member. The newspaper reports that 1,105 marriage licenses were last year granted to couples being married by Universal Life ministers - and the number has doubled since 2009. In Ohio, the number is higher yet, with 1,600 weddings being officiated over by Universal Life-ordained friends[35].

Even if we were to argue that the number of ordinations claimed by these organisations have been inflated by an order of magnitude, online ordination would remain a phenomenon of sufficient scope to be worthy of the attention of scholars of religion. Attention that it has thus far not received. The available academic literature on online ordination focuses on its legal status[36] and ignores its religious and social implications.

Much of the early history of the ULC consisted of legal battles that need not concern us here. However, there is an ironic note to this story that demonstrates the self- contradictory relationship between the ULC and the American state. In a well-hidden page[37] on the site of "Louisiana Notary", a site that describes itself as " A newsletter published three times a year dedicated to the enhancement of notarial professionalism in Louisiana", we see that notaries public in Louisiana are encouraged to ordain with the ULC in order to officiate at weddings and are even supplied with a customised form to expedite the process. The page is undated and the site's front page does not link to it, so we may be looking at a process that no longer exists. Even so, the fact that at least at one stage, government officials were encouraged to ordain online shows that the relation between (online) church and state is a complex one

Conducting wedding ceremonies remains the focus of online ordination, and this is reflected in the names of some organisations, such as "American Marriage Ministries" and "Holy Life and Marriage Ministers Fellowship". However, Avila[38] recounts an instance where being ordained online enabled him to assist a friend who had a philosophical objection to a mandatory flu injection. Similarly, Adams[39] describes how a psychic healer "said it was difficult to get clients without some kind of official stamp of approval", which she obtained to her satisfaction via ULC ordination. It seems, therefore, that the legitimacy of online-ordained ministers is spreading beyond the realm of wedding ceremonies.

Typologies of online ordination

There are a variety of organisations offering online ordination, and distinct differences exist between them. In this section I will examine these differences and determine if any are profound enough to create a typology of online ordaining organisations.

By religion

The vast majority of organisations offering online ordination employ Christian language and imagery in their presentation. The term Protestant term "minister" seems almost universally used, even if the imagery and terminology otherwise used by some organisations veers towards the Catholic. Indeed, the very notion underlying online ordination, that it is

the individual's relationship with God that makes him or her a minister, not years of study and the official imprimatur of a worldly organisation, is essentially Protestant in nature[40].

Other religions are also getting into the act, however. The Satanic Chapel[41], for example, offers online ordination via the ULC. The Esoteric Theological Seminary ordains ministers according to broadly New Age/Esoteric teachings and allows people to design their own title: "Healing Touch Minister, Youth Minister, Ordained Rabbi, Gnostic Minister, Priest, Shaman, Reiki Healer, Ordained Celtic Druid Minister, Teutonic Chaplain, Interfaith Chaplain, Pastoral Counselling Minister, etc."[42]. Even Judaism has seen an influx of rabbis ordained by a non-traditional institution[43]. Online ordination is sufficiently well understood by the general population that satirical posts appearing on Facebook require no further explanation, even when they reference, for example, Hinduism, a religion that has not actually seen any online ordination, with its call to "Become a guru!"[44]

Three Soto Zen priests were ordained in an online ceremony[45]. This example stretches the usual definition of online ordination (the three new priests had gone through the traditional Zen training regimen), but they do demonstrate that the Internet is becoming a deeply integrated aspect of religious practise. Online ordination as it is commonly understood is merely the extreme expression of this trend.

A special case in this regard is the Shema Yisrael Network[46], which, via the Jewish Friends of the American Armed Forces (JFAAF)[47], acts as an online recommendation agency for prospective Jewish chaplains in the US armed forces. This is not quite online ordination as we normally understand it, but it too shows the way in which the Internet is increasingly becoming a normal entry path into recognised clerical roles.

Despite this modest increase of interest in online ordination among a variety of religions, this does not seem to be enough on which to base a typology. The intentions of the people behind ordination at the Esoteric Theological Seminary and, for example, the First International Church of the Web[48] might differ radically, but intentions are notoriously difficult to research accurately and in any case, it hardly affects the mechanics of the online ordination process.

Still, is there a least common denominator, a tiny piece of doctrine on which all or most online ordination website creators can agree? Almost all the websites contain doctrinal statements explaining their position, and some of these explicitly serve as justification for the practice of online ordination. To give perhaps the most eloquent example:

> American Marriage Ministries, its members, ministers and congregants, believe that marriage is a sacred union. We believe that marriage is the natural right of all people, regardless of race, sexual

> identity, nationality, socioeconomic status, or religious background.
>
> Marriage is celebrated all around the world in a variety of ways, each marital ceremony celebrating the values of the couple, their community, and their cultures. The traditions of marriage predate the founding of the United States, the Abrahamic religions, and the emergence of democratic society. We believe that a phenomenon so ancient and revered, and so ubiquitous throughout the ages, can only be defined as sacred.
>
> Our faith is one that is universal. Marriage is an institution that crosses cultural boundaries and unites peoples. We believe that marriage is of a higher power.
>
> We believe that every couple united in marriage has the right to choose how they will observe, and who will conduct, their sacred rite. --- American Marriage Ministries.[49]

Not all the organizations are quite as explicit in their doctrinal statement as the AMM. However, we see Saint Peter's Ministry citing John 15:16 as the scriptural basis for their activities and continue to state that

> Saint Peter´s Ministry only acknowledges what God has done and does grant spiritual authority to those called by Jesus Christ to the ministry. This is one of the reasons ordained ministers part of this Church and Ministry remain autonomous, in charge of their ministry finances and calling.[50]

If we are to parse the various statements on these websites and construct a composite statement, we arrive at something like this: „Marriage itself is a sacred action, and the state has wrongly restricted the act of marrying two people to those who have spent years being indoctrinated in seminaries and licensed by their churches, without taking account of the spiritual state of the individual or his/her relationship to God and the wedding couple." No organisation would phrase it in those exact words, but this is the common thread one sees on their websites. Online ordination is a political act, a small rebellion against the status quo. But not too political, not too rebellious. The wedding conducted by a minister ordained online stays within the traditional church wedding paradigm even as it rejects where that paradigm originated.

By region

Regionalism does not appear to be a useful way to categorise online ordination. As we have seen above, online ordination is a peculiarly Anglophone development. My research showed no evidence of online ordination in Continental Europe or Scandinavia, nor, for that matter, in Asia.

More specifically, while there are organisations active in Canada (where the ULC has a branch[51]) and the United Kingdom[52], and to a limited extent even in South Africa, where individuals advertise their status as ULC ministers[53], the vast majority are based in the USA, to such an extent that we can regard online ordination as an American innovation that has been exported to other Anglophone countries.

I suggest that the main reason for this lies in the constitutional shelter given to any religious claim by the First Amendment to the American Constitution, which makes American courts unusually reticent to label any organized belief system a fraudulent religion[54], and the byzantine complexity of the American legal system, where an organisation may encounter different levels of official and judicial welcome in different states and counties. Indeed, a number of organisations explicitly state on their websites in which US states their credentials are recognised. Since the legal status of any given organisation in any given state may change as new judgements are issued, we will not go into the details here.

By commercial involvement

All online ordination organisations, without exception, charge a fee for their services. Just how much they charge, and where in the process it occurs, varies. The one extreme is provided by the Church of the Latter-Day Dude[55], an organisation that bases its philosophy on the film "The Big Lebowski"[56], which supplies a personalised digital certificate in TIFF format for free. During the course of my research, I obtained such a certificate. At no stage was I asked whether I even liked the film.
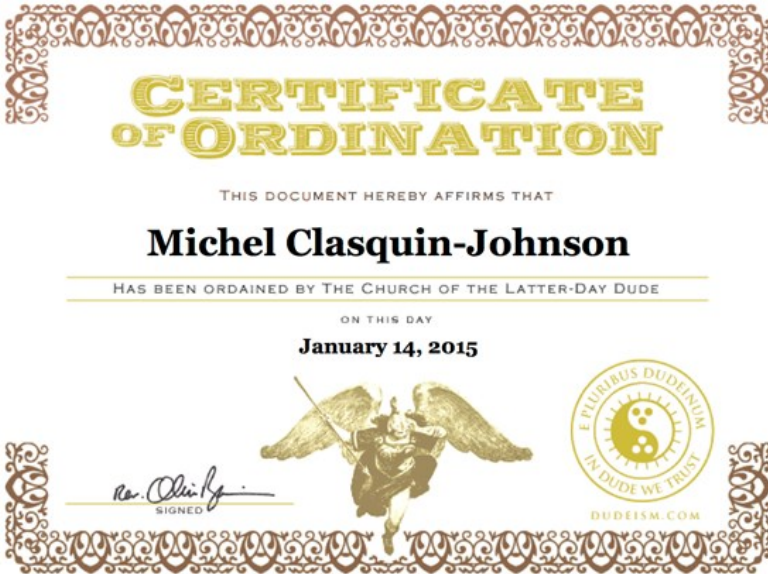
A modest fee of USD10 is asked for a printed certificate with an embossed seal, while more comprehensive packs are available for 22 and 35 dollars, respectively.

A more common approach is that the newly ordained minister receives an email confirming his or her new status[57], while any further proof one's new status, such as certificates, ID cards and Letters of Good Standing, must then be purchased. Some online ordination organisations also sell ministerial robes, marriage certificate templates and other accoutrements.

Beyond this, there are organisations that couple ordination with ministerial training, even if it occurs post-ordination, and there the costs can be considerable. However, there is not enough variation here to establish a typology.

We should also take note that the financial demands of online ordination organisations have caused many to describe the whole phenomenon as a "scam". Indeed, even other online ordination organisations and online Bible colleges use the word to denigrate the competiton[58].

From the perspective of this article, however, it matters little whether such organisations are scams or not. Even if they are, that still leaves us with the question why there is a demand for their services and what that tells us about the place of religion in the online era.

By level of commitment required

It should not be thought that all online ordination organisations require the same level of commitment from their prospective ordainees. In fact, every one requires a certain level of commitment to be formally or implicitly assented to. The variation we see here makes it the most likely candidate for a typology of online ordination, since it touches on how these commitments function as a religious experience. I will approach this from a functionalist perspective, and since Durkheim's[59] famous definition of religion, it has been generally accepted that a functional understanding of religion must take account of both religious belief and religious action.

I therefore propose that we ask whether we see requirements of expression of *belief* (credal commitment) and of *behaviour* (behavioural commitment) in the commitments required during the act of being ordained online.

Level One: Neither belief nor behaviour (explicitly) required

For some organizations, commitment requirements are set at a very low level. The ULC, for example, lists its credo on its home page:

> "Do only that which is right"
>
> The Universal Life Church believes that it is every person's responsibility to act holistically, to do nothing to impinge on the rights of others, and to uphold religious diversity and freedom.
>
> Everyone – men, women, and children from around the globe – must be able to practice their spiritual and religious beliefs without interference or threat from any government, religious, or societal force. [60]

The form one completes and sends to the ULC does not contain an explicit "I Agree" checkbox, but it could be argued that an explicit assent to this credo is implied by the very act of getting ordained. Another example of this implicit giving of assent is the form on the Spiritual Humanism website.

Even so, strictly speaking there is nothing to stop someone with purely mercenary intentions to ordain with Level One organisations.

Level Two: Behavioural requirements

The next level of commitment is found on the websites like that of American Marriage Ministries. Here the aspiring minister must digitally sign an affirmation to conduct him- or herself according to certain legal and ethical guidelines that are printed on the web page. There is still no explicit requirement to assent to any articles of belief. Thus far, clicking through these requirements amounts to little more than clicking "I agree" on a software license, but at least there is that much of an informed consent to the organisation's requirements. We can regard Level Two organisations as requiring a commitment to certain behaviours, but not too much of a commitment.

Level Three: Belief requirements

The third level of commitment does require one to assent to a certain doctrinal position. No longer is ordination open to all. Arke Ministries Organization International, for example, restricts its ordination to "those who are of the Christian faith"[61], but requires no more in-depth statements of faith and proceeds to downplay the reality of differences in scriptural interpretation. Belief is required here: there seems to be an implicit assumption that behaviour will follow automatically. Arke's website reserves the right to refuse applicants and warns that it may ask for documentary proof, but the bar to ordination is still fairly low. Again, we see the common theme of a requirement, in this case of belief, but not too much.

Levels Two and Three should not be seen as a hierarchy. Both require more from the prospective ordinand than Level One, but both require just commitment of a single factor. We can render this graphically as follows:

Level 2 - behavioural commitment	Level 3 - credal commitment
Level 1 - no commitment	

Level Four: Both belief and behaviour required

A fourth level can be seen on the website "Ministers-Best-Friend!"[62], which claims to be associated with the " Cambridge Theological Seminary"[63]. It caters to conservative, evangelical Christians and reserves its ordination for those judged sufficiently Christian. There is no need to read between the lines here: it calls itself the "Most Comprehensive Conservative Christian Web Site". The site's requirements for ordination are stated as follows:

> You must sign a "Statement of Faith"
> You must sign a "Statement of Calling"

> You must sign a "Statement of New Birth"
> You must sign a "Statement of Authenticity"
> You must sign a "Statement of World Evangelism"
> You must sign a "Statement of Dedication to Christ!"
> You must sign a "Statement of Absolute Belief in Scripture"
> You must sign a "Statement of No Same-Sex Marriage / Homosexuality"[64]

We have come a long way from the ULC and others on that level, which will ordain anyone with Internet access. Here we see not only explicit demands for certain statements of faith, but also a demand that the prospective ordainee refrain from conducting same-sex marriages and commits to global evangelistic activity. Both belief and behaviour are required here. The pattern we saw in Levels One to Three is now broken: the requirements are clear and definite. Online ordination or not, this website sets out the requirements of a traditional religious organisation.

Level Four can be regarded as hierarchically above both levels Two and Three, giving us the following picture:

Level 4 - both behavioural and credal commitment	
Level 2 - behavioural commitment	Level 3 - credal commitment
Level 1 - no commitment	

Level Five: An additional requirement

There is a fifth level, where online ordination shades into online theological study. A number of online ordination organisations offer some sort of training on an ordain-now-study-later model that inverts the traditional order of events and some offer pre-ordination training, even if it seems truncated from a conventional point of view. At times, it becomes difficult to determine if a Level Five organisation should be classified as an online ordination organisation at all, and no doubt some will be offended even to be mentioned in the same breath as the straightforward online ordination organisations such as the ULC. Nevertheless, their existence hints at the destabilising power the Internet has in the religious sphere.

In these fifth level organisations, besides *belief* and *behaviour*, we see an additional emphasis on *knowledge* that brings us closer to traditional ideas of ministerial formation. Indeed, not all ministers ordained online, even by lower-level organisations, are theologically unqualified:

> Meghan Gurley, for instance, studied religion as an undergraduate at Emory University in Atlanta and then earned a master's degree in theology in

> 1997 at nearby Columbia Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. But when it came time to seek ordination, Ms. Gurley realized two things. First, she did not want the 24/7 responsibilities of a congregational minister. Second, she did not agree with all elements of Presbyterian doctrine. So, after more than a decade of work in the nonprofit sector, she received her online ordination from the Universal Life Church in 2009[65].

A few online ordination organisations extend this training into the granting of degrees, up to and including the degree of Doctor of Divinity. Needless to say, these degrees are not recognised by any mainline churches or academic accreditation agencies.

Although I have named this a level, to continue with this model's terminology, it does not occupy a place above Level Four. Organisations from any of the first four levels can and do offer training. This makes it an ancillary level, not really part of the hierarchy:

Level 4 - both behavioural and credal commitment		"Level" 5 - Ministerial training offered to ministers ordained online at any of the other three levels.
Level 2 - behavioural commitment	Level 3 - credal commitment	
Level 1 - no commitment		

Understanding online ordination

What we have seen so far sets the scene for the more fundamental discussion to follow. The central question in this article is not what motivates someone to set up an online ordination website, even though that forms part of the typology we have developed above. The central question is why there is a demand for this kind of service.

To narrow things down, while online ordination organisation may suggest other duties and benefits of the ordained minister - duties such as baptisms and funerals, benefits such as reserved parking - it is the wedding that stands central in this issue. Yet in all the countries where online ordination can be found, alternatives exist. In every case, one can have a purely secular wedding by engaging the services of a justice of the peace or the equivalent government official. Or, if there is some residual respect for a religious tradition on the part of either of both partners, it is not that hard to find a suitably liberal-minded minister who will agree to conduct a wedding for interfaith couples[66], or for people who may be secular in daily life, but who still wish for a veneer of religious

respectability on their wedding day. In alternative religious circles, Unitarian ministers are particularly well known for doing just that.

On the few occasions when people have been asked why they chose a friend to get ordained online and marry them, answers have tended to focus on the online ordainee's qualities as a friend of the couple. This does not really answer our question, though. Why would a friend's personal qualities override the dictates of centuries of tradition? Why enter into a marriage of which the legal status remains a matter of debate? The question remains: why is there a demand for this?

Secularization theory does not suffice at this point; indeed online ordination contradicts it. As we have seen, secular alternatives exist, and in at least one case, that of California, it is possible to become a Deputy Marriage Commissioner for a day, a secular version of being ordained online. Online ordination does not represent a lessening of the role of religion in society. On the contrary, it points to a constant, or possibly increasing, need for a religious element in the lives of what may be otherwise largely secular people.

One possible explanation is to point at the increasing commercialization of religion itself. The USA, the home of online ordination, is also the country that gave us the Prosperity Gospel, millionaire pastors and marathon television fundraisers. If religion itself has become intertwined with commerce, then it is easier to accept a straightforward financial transaction as constituting a valid ordination. In such an understanding, online ordination is an interesting but not particularly important development within an existing politico-religious continuum.

However, while such an explanation is useful in understanding the reasons it arose in that specific time and place, it does not help us understand why it arose at all. Online ordination is an Anglophone, more specifically American, phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. But it is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a far wider change that stretches far beyond the USA geographically and has a longer historical background. It occurs in a milieu that has seen the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, plunging marriage rates and a growing acceptance of nontraditional cohabitation arrangements ranging from LAT (living apart together) relationships to same-sex marriage. This development extends far beyond the USA, in fact, the USA is trailing Western Europe in some respects. To understand online ordination, we need to examine it in this much wider context.

To be married by someone who was ordained online is not a last resort but a deliberate, positive choice. It is a choice that seems to be made more and more often these days, which leads me to suspect that while it may be an insignificant historical happenstance in its own right, it points to the larger socio-historical development. It is an aspect of a fundamental change in the western Zeitgeist.

For two and a half thousand years, western thought has been characterised by Aristotelian logic. Of course, it predated Aristotle and its development did not stop with the death of that thinker - its direct descendant, Boolean logic, determines the operation of the computer on which I write this article - but it remains a handy label. In this mode of thought, something is either A or it is not-A. Or to put it another way, the proposition A is either True or False.

This kind of thinking has ramifications beyond formal epistemology. Western society is built on it. Our legal systems rely on whether a person can distinguish between "right" and "wrong". Our educational systems rigorously distinguish between "graduates" and "dropouts", never considering whether the dropout may also have learnt something worthwhile, or whether a particular graduate gained anything from four years of study. In politics, you are either "conservative" or "liberal". And in terms of weddings, one either is a minister or one is not. If you are not a minister, you cannot conduct a valid marriage ceremony. We live in the civilization that Aristotle built.

But there are increasing signs that this philosophy is losing its iron grip on the western mind. We are seeing an increasing number of people describing themselves as "spiritual but not religious", a self-ascription that would have made sense to no-one fifty years ago. Artificial Intelligence researchers rely on multivalued "fuzzy logic". Religions and philosophies from Asia (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism etc.), which never subscribed to Aristotle's Law of the Excluded Middle to begin with, increasingly make their presence felt in the western world - a course in Chinese Philosophy is now one of the most popular options at Harvard University. A new philosophy called metamodernism, sees a key proponent declaring that, *"*[R]ecent understandings of metamodernism emphasize ... *simultaneity* - the idea that the metamodern self does not move between differing positions but in fact inhabits all of them at once"[67].

"Aristotelian" philosophy remains the dominant worldview in the western world, but the above examples indicate that cracks are starting to appear in this system. In a world in transition from the all-encompassing, all-or-nothing Aristotelian paradigm to a looser, multivalued one in which identities are fluid, redefinable, contemporaneous with their opposites, and temporary, online ordination makes perfect sense. The online ordination minister is indeed a minister and can indeed officiate at a wedding - for now. He or she both is and is not a minister in the traditional sense - *at the moment of the wedding*. The status of wedding official bestowed by law is a mere concession to the state structures in which the couple find themselves.

Taking a leaf from the "spiritual but not religious" terminology, we might describe those married by an online ordination minister as "married but not wed". They have honoured history by having an

authority figure declare them married in front of a congregation of sorts. But not too much of an authority figure. When the ceremony is over, the minister becomes just one more of the guests. He was a minister and perhaps will be again one day. But that is over and he is once again Tom, the family friend who agreed to spend $35 to be ordained and act as their marriage officer. The online ordination minister slips in and out of the ministerial role in a way the traditional minister never can.

Indeed, if the couple cared to go further back in history they would dispense with the minister altogether and simply declare themselves married to their guests, as was the case in ancient Rome. Perhaps legislation will allow this too one day.

For organised religion, the lesson to be learned from the online ordination phenomenon is that the need for what religion has offered for centuries - tradition, ritual, social cohesion - remains in place. But if organised religion is to remain the prime source of those services it will have to adapt. It adapted to the state's seizure of marriage as being its responsibility. In Anglophone countries it adapted to a subordinate role as the state subcontracted the wedding ceremony to selected religious professionals. With the rise of online ordination, religion finds itself in an open, competitive market, and it will increasingly have to defend its role, rather than taking it for granted. It is unclear that organised religion has the ability to do this. Certainly we see no action by any established religion to compete with the online ordainers directly.

Does this mean that in the future, online ordination will become the norm and weddings conducted by either state officials or traditional ministers will become a minority? Possible, but not likely. Online ordination is a transitional phenomenon, a symptom of a society in which one paradigm is grudgingly making room for another. More likely, marriage, and the wedding ceremony, will evolve into forms we cannot predict at present, and online ordination will become a small historical footnote.

Until that happens, however, it seems that the demand for online ordination remains high and is even set to grow because of residual religious opposition to same-sex marriage. Perhaps the time has come for scholars of religion to investigate this fascinating phenomenon on the fringe of the religious world.

Notes

[1] Sierra Marquina, "Tom Hanks: I Studied the Ministry for $35 to Officiate Allison Williams' Wedding, Call Me 'Reverend Tom Hanks,'" US Magazine, September 28, 2015, http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/tom-hanks-spent-35-to-officiate-allison-williams-wedding-2015289.

[2] Moshe Reiss, "A Marriage Officiated by a Rabbi and Two Priests", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 16 (2006): 115–19.

[3] Luchina Fischer, "Chelsea Clinton's Interfaith Marriage Challenge: Kids, Holidays, Soul-Searching", ABC News, August 2, 2010, http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/chelsea-clintons-interfaith-marriage-marc-mezvinsky-ahead/story.

[4] Times of Israel, "Chelsea Clinton's Wedding Proof of Reform Jews' Assimilation, Says Israeli Minister", Times of Israel, February 1, 2016, http://www.timesofisrael.com/chelsea-clintons-wedding-proof-of-reform-jews-assimilation-says-israeli-minister/.

[5] " ... in most non-western cultures still and in every society heretofore, marriage has been insisted upon as the required precondition for the mating of men and women as the act that initiates and sustains the family order considered the foundation of all tribal and civil life" - Francis L Jackson, "Freedom And The Tie That Binds: Marriage As An Ethical Institution", *Animus: The Canadian Journal of Philosophy and Humanities*, 6 (2001): 115.

[6] Paul Vlaardingerbroek, "Marriage, Divorce and Living Arrangements in the Netherlands", Family Law Quarterly 29, No. 3 (1995): 636.

[7] Linda Gradstein, 2013 "Israel Civil Marriage Ban Blocks Those Not Considered Jewish From Wedding", Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/12/israel-civil-marriage-ban_n_3429764.html.

[8] USA Today, "In Mideast, Interfaith Couples Travel to Cyprus to Wed", USA Today, October 19, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-10-18-cyprus-weddings_N.htm.

[9] Contrary to public belief, ships' captains are not able to act as marriage officers for legal purposes - unless, of course they too were ordained online.

[10] City and County of San Francisco. "Deputy Marriage Commissioner for a Day." Office of the County Clerk, City and County of San Francisco, http://sfgov.org/countyclerk/deputy-marriage-commissioner-day.

[11] Act No. 25 of 1961, as amended. This law remains in force today, South African legal tradition tending to favour the amendment of existing legislation rather than the introduction of completely new acts.

[12] https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Marriage_Act,_1961

[13] Meegan Henkeman, "Muslim Marriages in South Africa Get the Long Deserving Full Recognition", http://www.schoemanlaw.co.za/muslim-marriages-south-africa-get-long-deserving-full-recognition/. cf. Waheeda Amien and Annie Leatt, "Legislating Religious Freedom : An Example of Muslim Marriages in South Africa", *Maryland Journal of International Law*, 505 (2014).

[14] Judith Duffy, "Ten Years After Humanist Weddings Were Legalised, the Ceremonies Now Rival Church Marriages", Herald Scotland, http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13412806.Ten_years_after_humanist_weddings_were_legalised__the_ceremonies_now_rival_church_marriages/.

[15] Cloutier v. Costco, 390 F. 3d 126 (1st Cir. 2004), cert denied, 2005 U.S. LEXIS 4923, cf. Sarah Netter, "Student's Body Modification Religion Questioned After Nose Piercing Controversy", ABC News, http://abcnews.go.com/US/students-body-modification-religion-questioned-nose-piercing-controversy/story; Lucille M. Ponte and Jennifer L. Gillan, "Gender Performance over Job Performance: Body Art Work Rules and the Continuing Subordination of the Feminine", *Duke Journal of*

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[16] Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, "Verfassungsfeindlich': Church, State, And New Religions In Germany", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 2, no. 2 (1999); Michael Browne, "Should Germany Stop Worrying and Love the Octopus - Freedom of Religion and the Church of Scientology in Germany and the United States", *Indiana International & Comparative Law Review* 9 (1998); Gerhard Robbers, "Religious Freedom in Germany", *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2001.

[17] http://www.ulc.org.

[18] Lewis Ashmore, The Modesto Messiah: The Famous Mail-Order Minister (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Press, 1977).

[19] Michael Mazza, "The Robin Hood of American Religion Goes Online", University Wire USA, http://www.religionnewsblog.com/18901/universal-life-church-2.

[20] It should be noted that on its website (http://www.saintjamescollege.org/), St James College claims to be "the world's first online seminary". As we shall see below, it is not necessarily quite in the same category as the ULC and both claims can therefore be accepted.

[21] See the Addendum to this article.

[22] http://universallifechurch.ca/.

[23] http://www.themonastery.org/.

[24] http://www.ulcseminary.org/.

[25] There is a general trend for this kind of organisation to be short-lived. An incomplete list of defunct "Mail Order and Internet Churches" can be found at http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3402400119/mail-order-and-internet.html.

[26] http://www.universallifechurchministers.org/. An independently verified list appears on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ministers_of_the_Universal_Life_Church.

[27] A concept perhaps most clearly discussed by Simler ("The Economics of Social Status", RibbonFarm. Experiments in Refactored Perception, http://www.ribbonfarm.com/2013/05/01/the-economics-of-social-status/), although he does not use the actual term. For an example of the more common use of the term, restricted to the digital realm, see Rachel Botsman, "Welcome to the New Reputation Economy", Wired UK, http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2012/09/features/welcome-to-the-new-reputation-economy/viewall.

[28] Sue Nowicki, "Universal Life Goes On", Modesto Bee, http://www.modbee.com/living/article3118424.html. cf. Beliefnet, "Universal Life Church Still Churning Out Ministers", Beliefnet, http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2001/02/Universal-Life-Church-Still-Churning-Out-Ministers.aspx.

[29] Devan Sipher, "Great Wedding! But Was It Legal?", New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/05/fashion/05marry.html.

[30] Sue Nowicki, "Ordination Not a 'Lark' for All ULC Ministers", Modesto Bee, http://www.modbee.com/living/article3118425.html.

[31] cf. Sarah Husk, "Universal Ordination For Those Who Surf the Web" Brown Daily

Herald,   http://www.browndailyherald.com/2008/11/07/universal-ordination-for-those-who-surf-the-web/.

[32] https://theamm.org/.

[33] Jana Kasperkevic, "I Now Pronounce You: Americans Step Up to Help Marry Same-Sex Couples", The Guardian Online, http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/30/same-sex-marriages-americans-get-ordained.

[34] Jenna Reinbold, "Sacred Institutions and Secular Law: The Faltering Voice of Religion in the Courtroom Debate over Same-Sex Marriage", *Journal of Church and State,* 56, no. 2 (2012): 248–68; Neilan S. Chaturvedi, "The next Generation? A Re-examination of Religious Influence on Mexican-American Attitudes toward Same-Sex Marriage", *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2, no. 4 (2014): 589–606.

[35] Daisy Dumas, "Become a Priest for $5! Online Ordinations Booming as More Weddings Than Ever Are Officiated by Couples' Friends", Daily Mail, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2114680/Become-priest-5-Online-ordinations-booming-weddings-officiated-couples-friends.html.

[36] e.g. Joanna L Grossman, "If Being Married Is the Goal , Beware the 'Symbolic Resort' Wedding in Mexico", *Hofstra Law Faculty Scholarhip*, 2014; Deanne Katz, "Can 'Priests' Ordained Online Officiate Weddings?", Law & Daily Life. The Findlaw Life, Family and Workplace Law Blog, 2013, http://blogs.findlaw.com/law_and_life/2013/02/can-priests-ordained-online-officiate-weddings.html; Alexandra Marin, "Internet-Ordained Ministers and Marriage in Pennsylvania: Bucks County and York County Disagree on the Legality of Marriage According to the Pennsylvania Marriage Act", Rutgers Journal of Law & Religion 10, Spring 2009

[37] http://www.louisiananotary.com/chaplaincy.

[38] Severo Avila, "Online Ordination Finally Put to Good-Ish Use", Rome News-Tribune, http://www.northwestgeorgianews.com/rome/opinion/columns/column-online-ordination-finally-put-to-good-ish-use/article_03ac76cc-802e-11e4-94f7-37d2491d40db.html.

[39] Heather Adams, "Online Ordinations Aren't Just For Weddings Anymore", Sojourners, https://sojo.net/articles/online-ordinations-aren-t-just-weddings-anymore.

[40] I am indebted to my colleague Danie Goosen for this insight.

[41] http://www.satanicchapel.org.

[42] http://www.northernway.org/ordain.shtml

[43] Josh Nathan-Kazis, "Online-Ordained Rabbis Grab Pulpits", The Jewish Daily Forward, http://forward.com/articles/166946/online-ordained-rabbis-grab-pulpits/#ixzz3OnrZFizm.

[44] http://tinyurl.com/hxw52wt.

[45] Jundo Cohen and Taigur Turlur, "Welcome to the Future: Zen Priest Ordination Performed Simultaneously on Three Continents", Lion's Roar, http://www.lionsroar.com/welcome-to-the-future-first-zen-priest-ordination-on-three-continents/.

[46] http://www.shemayisrael.com.

[47] http://jfaaf.org.

[48] http://www.ficotw.org/.

[49] https://theamm.org/theological-doctrine.

[50] http://spchristianministry.weebly.com/ordination.html.

[51] http://universallifechurch.ca

[52] http://www.onlineordination.co.uk

[53] e.g. http://www.stephenvanbasten.co.za/about.html

[54] A 1974 decision by the United States District Courth for Eastern District (*Universal Life Church, Inc. V United States of America, Case Number Civ. No. 1954*) reads, in part, as follows: "Neither this Court, nor any branch of this Government, will consider the merits or fallacies of a religion. Nor will the Court compare the beliefs, dogmas, and practices of a newly organized religion with those of an older, more established religion. Nor will the Court praise or condemn a religion, however excellent or fanatical or preposterous it may seem. Were the court to do so, it would impinge upon the guarantees of the First Amendment."

[55] http://dudeism.com/ordination/.

[56] Ben Walters, "Dudeism, the Faith That Abides in The Big Lebowski", *The Guardian Online*, January 20, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jan/20/dudeism-the-big-lebowski. (accessed July 5, 2016).

[57] I also ordained with the ULC while researching online ordination and received such an email immediately. A year later, I received a reminder that I had yet to purchase any certificates or accoutrements.

[58] viz. http://www.ministers-best-friend.com/Free-Ordination-Scams-Like-Universal-Life-Church-by-NewtonStein.html and https://www.christianleadersinstitute.org/online-ordination-scams.

[59] Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 47.

[60] http://www.ulc.org.

[61] http://www.arkeministries.org/onlineordinationrules.htm.

[62] http://www.ministers-best-friend.com.

[63] It should be noted that this seminary is neither part of Cambridge University, nor even an institution in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but in fact is incorporated in Florida.

[64] http://www.ministers-best-friend.com/Free-Ordination-1-by-Cambridge-Theological-Seminary-by-NewtonStein.html.

[65] Samuel G Freedman, "Couples Personalizing Role of Religion in Wedding", New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/couples-personalizing-role-of-religion-in-wedding-ceremonies.html.

[66] In the interest of transparency, I can report that my own interfaith (Catholic/Buddhist) wedding in 2006 was conducted by a Reformed minister with a long record of working in interreligious dialogue and academic research into South African Islamic history.

[67] Seth Abramson, "Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism", Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/ten-key-principles-in-met_b_7143202.html.

Addendum: Organisations that ordain online as of October 2016

- 2 Timothy 45 http://2timothy45.org/
- American Marriage Ministries https://theamm.org/

- Arke Ministries Organization International
  http://www.arkeministries.org/
- Christian University http://christianuniversity.co.nz/
- Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster
  http://www.venganza.org/ordination/
- Church of the Latter-Day Dude http://dudeism.com/ordination/
- Esoteric Theological Seminary http://www.northernway.org/
- First International Church of the Web http://www.ficotw.org/
- First Nation Church and Ministry
  http://www.firstnationministry.org/
- Holy Life and Marriage Ministers Fellowship
  http://www.hlam.net/
- Independent Lutheran Diocese
  http://www.independentlutheran.com/
- Ministers' Best Friend http://www.ministers-best-friend.com/
- National Association of Christian Ministers
  http://www.nacministers.com/
- Open Ministry http://www.open-ministry.org/
- Ordain Me Please http://www.ordainmeplease.com/
- Pacific Life Church http://www.pacificlifechurch.org/
- Prophetic Analysis Research Institute
  https://sites.google.com/site/theparinstitute/home
- Rose Ministries http://roseministries.org/
- Saint James College http://www.saintjamescollege.org/
- Saint Peter's Christian Ministry
  http://spchristianministry.weebly.com/
- Satanic Chapel http://www.satanicchapel.org/
- Spirit Fire Ministries http://www.spiritfire-ministries.com/
- Spiritual Humanism http://www.spiritualhumanism.org/
- United National Ministry http://www.onlineordination.co.uk/
- Universal Life Church Canada http://universallifechurch.ca/
- Universal Life Church http://www.ulc.org/
- Universal Life Church Monastery
  http://www.themonastery.org/ordination
- Universal Life Church Seminary http://www.ulcseminary.org/
- Universal Ministries http://universalministries.com/
- Wesleyan Church https://www.wesleyan.org/crosstraining
- World Christianship Ministries http://www.wcm.org/

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