

Religious vows, rituals, readings and music should be allowed in civil marriage, study shows

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Couples marrying in civil ceremonies should be allowed to have religious vows, rituals, readings, and music as part of their ceremony for the first time, a major new study has concluded.

The study is the first investigation into the words and rituals that are requested by couples and permitted or vetoed by registrars. The researchers conclude that most registrars take their role very seriously and are keen to accommodate couples' wishes wherever possible. However, confusion and inconsistencies arise because official guidance requires registrars to exclude anything they understand to be "religious in nature".

The Government has recently announced that it will ask the Law Commission to conduct a review of marriage law, and the researchers hope that their findings will contribute to this review.

Currently, the law forbids the use of religious elements in civil marriage in England and Wales to ensure separation between religious and non-religious ceremonies. Official guidance requires registrars to exclude anything they understand to be "religious in nature".

The study shows this guidance is being applied unevenly, simply because registrars cannot be expert in the marriage traditions of all religions.

The study shows this confusion is having more impact on people hoping to have traditional Church of England vows because registrars are more familiar with them than with vows from other religious marriage ceremonies.

Experts asked registrars for their instinctive reaction as to whether they would allow a selection of vows and rituals from various religions to be included in a civil marriage ceremony. They found:

- 93 per cent of respondents were willing to allow a vow taken from a Hindu marriage service
- 79 per cent of respondents were willing to allow words taken from the marriage vows of the Baha'i faith
- only 25 per cent were willing to allow the familiar words "to have and to hold", which originate in the Church of England marriage ceremony. However, 89 per cent were happy to allow the Church's less familiar updated wording: "all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you".

A number of registrars did however state that, in practice, they would check whether something was religious before deciding whether to veto it. The research was carried out by Dr. Stephanie Pywell, from The Open University Law School, and Professor Rebecca Probert, from the University of Exeter Law School.

Professor Probert said: "For couples, the content of the ceremony—and in particular the words that they say to each other as they make their lifelong commitment—is of the utmost importance. But the law in this area is in urgent need of reform—at a minimum to clarify what is required, and to eliminate inconsistencies in practice, and ideally to permit greater flexibility in what can be included in such ceremonies."

The study says any new regulations would need to be carefully worded to

ensure registrars are not expected to read religious wording as part of the ceremony, and reforms to the law would only mean they would observe religious words being said, or rituals performed. This would mirror what registrars can already do when they attend places of worship to register religious marriages.

Dr. Pywell said: "The current ban on content that is 'religious in nature' is hard to justify. Relaxing this restriction would allow couples to create marriage covenants using words that are most meaningful to them. Allowing them to include sacred, as well as secular, elements at such an important moment in their lives would enhance the dignity and solemnity of the occasion."

"Neither sacred nor profane: the permitted content of civil [marriage](#) ceremonies" is published in the journal *Child and Family Law Quarterly*.

Provided by University of Exeter

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