

Humanist Perspectives Celebrations and Ceremonies

It is natural to want to celebrate major events in our lives with a special ceremony. People have always marked important times in their lives, like marriages and the birth of children, and commemorated the lives of people when they die. Such ceremonies and rituals can be different from parties that we hold for events like birthdays, anniversaries, or graduations. They are often more focused and more formal. They provide an opportunity to express important feelings and step back and consider the bigger picture (e.g. to remind oneself about the significance of a new human being, rather than thinking only about the sleepless nights and dirty nappies). They give us time to acknowledge the important changes that are happening in our lives. They are also an opportunity to bring people together to show support and share in the happiness or grief, reminding us that we are not alone but part of a wider collection of people linked to each other in many varied ways.

There are no special rules or observances that non-religious people have to keep, nor are they obliged to attend any kind of service or ceremony beyond basic legal requirements, but many do want to do something special to mark significant occasions in their lives. They often prefer to do so through non-religious ceremonies, where they will not find themselves saying things they do not believe. Humanist organisations worldwide have therefore devised ceremonies suitable for different contexts and needs. The British Humanist Association conducts around 10,000 humanist ceremonies a year, and there are nearly 5,000 humanist marriages a year in Scotland.

Humanist ceremonies are created for the people involved, so each one is unique and personal. They often involve speeches, poetry, music, song, feasting, and dancing. They are inclusive and focus on what we all have in common: our humanity and shared human values. Humanists believe such values transcend any religious beliefs that some of the people present may have and speak to everyone regardless of their beliefs.

Naming ceremonies

A new baby or a new adopted child in the family is both a joyful and serious occasion. Humanists believe naming ceremonies are an opportunity to celebrate the arrival of a new human being. They are also an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the community of family and friends and to make promises of love and support to the new family member. Many humanists recognise how every new human has the potential to contribute to the good and progress of humanity. Every new life should therefore be acknowledged and celebrated.

Choosing a name and introducing this new person to the circle of family and friends are important to non-religious people, but christenings and other religious rituals in places of worship are unsuitable for many parents who do not believe in any god. A humanist naming ceremony can be held wherever the parents like and the parents can decide for themselves what they want to say. They often include readings, poems, music, and promises but there is not set pattern or script, making each ceremony unique.

Some people believe that there is a god or are gods who will help take care of us throughout our lives. Humanists do not believe in gods or are at least uncertain if they exist. Therefore they believe we need the love of other people, particularly family and friends, to help us in life. For humanists, the love, commitment, and support of our family and friends are really important. We have a responsibility to take care of each other. Humanist naming ceremonies will therefore focus on these ideas. Often parents choose mentors or supporting adults who promise to help the new child as they grow. Older brothers and sisters can also be involved in the ceremony.

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If a child is adopted, it is possible to have a special ceremony welcoming the child into its new family. Sometimes when families come together in a second marriage, the step-children can be involved in a humanist wedding ceremony. That way, they too are welcomed into the new family.

While not all humanists choose to have such celebrations, the British Humanist Association helps people who want to have humanist ceremonies by providing booklets, ideas, and celebrants. A humanist celebrant helps the participants to plan the event and choose readings, and leads the ceremony on the day.

Some promises and advice from humanist naming ceremonies:

‘Within each child there exists an immense potential that emerges as the years go by.’

‘We promise to use all our wisdom, patience and love to help Sarah fulfill herself and help others throughout her life.’

"We all have a part to play in her growth and development, in her happiness and welfare. Let us each accept our share of the responsibility and provide her with the respect, warmth, honesty, and love that she will need."

‘We hope to teach you the value of kindness, tolerance, and honesty, and hope you will come to love us not only as parents but as friends.’

‘Vicky and Antony have chosen this non-religious humanist ceremony because they believe that Alex should be free to make her own choices about what she believes when she is older.’

‘Carl, may you learn to love truth, even when it goes against you. May you cultivate kindness. May you find courage, and discover that you are stronger than the things you are afraid of. May you be brave in standing up for what is right. May you have courage to remain loyal to your deep convictions, and courage to admit when you have made a mistake.’

A list of responsibilities written by two humanist parents:

- To take joint responsibility for her welfare
- To provide continuing love and support, and help her grow to independence
- To respect her as an individual
- To help her develop physically and intellectually, by encouragement rather than pressure
- To influence her behaviour by good example, rather than by authoritative orders
- To help her to develop her own opinions, beliefs and values



Questions:

- 1) What would you want to promise or say to a new baby, or to a new member coming into your family? What promises would you make and what advice would you give?
- 2) What responsibilities do you think parents have towards their children?
- 3) What responsibilities do children have towards their parents?



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Weddings

A **marriage** and a **wedding** are not the same thing. Marriage or **civil partnership** is the legal union of two people as partners in a relationship. Many non-religious people get married in a register office and this is necessary in England and Wales to make the marriage legally binding (by law no religious language is allowed in this kind of civil wedding). However, many people find the experience of a register office does not meet their need for a personal and meaningful ceremony and want to do more. A humanist wedding ceremony provides this opportunity for non-religious couples. These ceremonies are often crafted over a long period of time. They are serious but joyful events and many couples feel it is their humanist wedding that is their 'real' marriage. A ceremony is a rite of passage that marks the transition from one stage of life to another. It is more than just a celebration. A humanist wedding can be held wherever the couple likes and they are encouraged to write their own promises to each other. They can be as formal or informal as the couple wish. There are no special rules or traditions, nor any set pattern or script, making each ceremony unique.

Some people believe that there is a god or are gods who love us and will help take care of us throughout our lives. Humanists do not believe in gods or are at least uncertain if they exist. Therefore they believe we need the love of other people, particularly family and friends, to help us in life. For humanists, the love, commitment, and support of our family and friends is really important. We have a responsibility to take care of each other. The decision of a couple to agree to love and support each other, and take responsibility for each other's welfare is therefore something humanists value and celebrate. They also recognise the importance of friends and family to support them in their marriage. Humanist weddings will therefore often focus on these ideas.

While not all humanists choose to have such celebrations, the British Humanist Association helps non-religious people who want to have a ceremony by providing booklets, ideas, and celebrants. A celebrant will work with the couple to create a ceremony that reflects who the couple really are, what they mean to each other, and what words they want to use to build the foundations of their marriage. They will also lead the ceremony on the day. Humanist celebrants will conduct weddings for couples who have been married to other people before, for couples from different faiths (who can share in the personal, non-religious content), and for same-sex couples. (Same-sex marriage was legalised in the UK, with the exception of Northern Ireland, in 2014.) For humanists the most important thing is that the two people love each other and have decided to offer their commitment and support to each other. Humanists believe that both men and women should make their own choice about whom they are going to marry and be happy with that choice. They also believe that both parties should enjoy an equal status in a marriage: it must be a cooperative venture.

Many humanists approve of the idea of marriage; many others believe that marriage is not an essential feature of a good relationship. These humanists therefore approve of **cohabitation** (unmarried couples living together). People should be free to make mutually agreeable decisions about how they wish to live their lives without interference or pressure from others or the state. Humanists believe that couples should think carefully before making the decision to get married: it is not a commitment that should be entered into lightly. However, they do not believe that marriage is 'sacred' and recognise that some relationships fail. Most humanists would like to see married couples try to work through any problems in their relationship. However, because humanists think human beings should consider the consequences of their actions and aim to minimise suffering, they see divorce as acceptable if it reduces overall unhappiness. They accept that people can make mistakes or that circumstances can change.

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Humanist weddings are becoming increasingly popular among the non-religious. In England there are more humanist weddings than there are of any non-Christian religions. In Scotland, where humanist marriages have held legal status since 2005, there are more humanist marriages than Roman Catholic or Church of Scotland marriages. Scotland is one of eight countries, from Norway to Australia to parts of the USA, that legally recognise humanist marriage ceremonies.

However, humanist marriages are not legally recognised in England, Wales, or Northern Ireland. A humanist wedding must be preceded or followed by a marriage in a register office for the marriage to be legal. Many humanists feel this discriminates against the non-religious. If the law changed then this would give non-religious people the same choice that religious people have of a meaningful ceremony conducted by someone who shares their values and approach to life.

Selected comments from humanist celebrants' speeches during humanist wedding ceremonies:

'They have chosen a humanist celebrant chiefly because it allows them to word their commitments themselves, highlighting what they feel is important to them.'

'They want today to be not just a public celebration of their union, but also a day to acknowledge their friends: the friends that have been there when they needed them. A day to acknowledge their families, who have carried them through the ups and downs of their early years, and who still support them now.'

'It has long been a tradition in many parts of the world for the father of the bride to 'hand over' his daughter to the bridegroom. However, Jane's father, David, is here today not to relinquish any form of 'ownership', but to signify in public his affirmation of Jane's choice to spend her life with Matthew. David are you happy for Jane to be married to Matthew and are you content to wish them well on their journey through life?'

'May the sun bring you new energies by day;
May the moon softly restore you by night.
May the rain wash away any worries you may have
And the breeze blow new strength into your being.
And then, all the days of your life,
May you walk gently through the world
And know its beauty.'



Questions:

- 1) Do you think what happens at a wedding should be completely the decision of the couple getting married?
- 2) What makes a good marriage?
- 3) What makes a good wedding?
- 4) What promises do you think it is important for marrying couples to make to each other?
- 5) Do you think humanist marriages should become legal and given the same recognition as religious marriages? What might a humanist say? What might a religious person say? Can you write an argument from one point of view arguing for or against legalising humanist marriages?

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Funerals

Many non-religious people feel that the words and sentiment at a religious funeral would be inappropriate for them, and humanist funerals are becoming increasingly popular in the UK. Sadness is often unavoidable, but it is also very important to celebrate the life of someone you have loved. The focus for many humanists should be on the person and the life that was lived, not on what holy books or religious authorities say will happen to them next. A humanist celebrant may conduct the ceremony and there will often be music and readings by friends and family. There are no prayers but there is often time for silent reflection. For humanists, the funeral is an opportunity for the family and friends of the deceased to grieve, to share memories, and to celebrate the life of the person who has died. It is a profound and necessary occasion for those still living.

This approach may be having a knock-on effect, as many religious funerals now focus more on celebrating the life of the deceased, and often give friends and family the chance to talk and use non-religious music and readings.

British Humanist Association members have been conducting funerals for each other since 1896.

Humanist poems about death:

I fall asleep in the full and certain hope
That my slumber shall not be broken;
And that, though I be all-forgetting,
Yet shall I not be allforgotten,
But continue that life in the thoughts and deeds of those I have loved.

Samuel Butler, 1835-1902

Is it so small a thing
To have enjoy'd the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done;
To have advanced true friends, and beat down baffling foes;
That we must feign a bliss
Of doubtful future date,
And while we dream on this
Lose all our present state,
And relegate to worlds yet distant our repose?



Hymn of Empedocles, Matthew Arnold, 1822-1888

Questions:

- 1) What would you like to be remembered for after you die?
- 2) Can you write your own poem or epitaph for a tombstone or a reading for a humanist funeral?
- 3) Should people wear black or bright colours to a funeral?
- 4) Can a funeral be considered a celebration?

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Coming of age

Many cultures and religions have ceremonies for young adults when they formally become adults or become members of that religion. In Scandinavian countries, where there is a strong tradition of coming-of-age ceremonies, humanist organisations offer alternatives to traditional religious ceremonies. In Norway, for example, special non-religious ceremonies are held in town halls for young people when they reach voting age. These non-religious confirmations (sometimes called civil confirmations or coming-of-age ceremonies), together with the preparation for these ceremonies, are popular activities for teenagers in these countries. The form of preparation varies, from camps in Finland and Sweden to courses in Iceland and Norway, but the main purpose is to reflect on and celebrate the new responsibilities that adulthood brings.

You can find out more about humanist confirmations in Norway at <http://www.human.no/Service meny/English/?index=10>

In Britain we seem a bit muddled about when people are actually considered an adult. For example, you can get married at 16 (possibly even before you are allowed to leave school), you can drive at 17, vote at 18, and people still celebrate becoming 21! It is sometimes suggested that we should introduce coming-of-age ceremonies here, perhaps in recognition of citizenship education. However religious coming-of-age ceremonies are declining in the UK and there is no sign of popular demand for an alternative.

Questions:

- 1) What is the difference between being a child and being an adult?
- 2) What responsibilities does being an adult bring?
- 3) Do you think it would be a good idea to have one age and a ceremony at which young people officially become adults? If so, at what age should it be?
- 4) What should young people have to do to prepare themselves for such a ceremony? What should they need to learn to be prepared for adulthood? Can you design a preparation course and ceremony?

Further resources:

- For more information about Humanist Ceremonies visit <https://humanistceremonies.org.uk>
- See *Humanist Perspectives: Family matters and relationships, and Death*