

Humanist ceremonies

Many people want to celebrate major events in their lives with a special ceremony and that includes many humanists. 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. These events can be important markers in the stories of our life. They can provide an opportunity to express our feelings and to step back and consider the 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 the grief, reminding us that we are not alone but are connected to each other.



What is a humanist ceremony?

Humanists provide naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals for non-religious people who might feel that religious ceremonies are unsuitable for them. They often draw attention to things that humanists value: our **freedom** to choose how we live, our **responsibilities** to each other, and the importance of **connections** in our lives.

Humanists UK have been carrying out non-religious ceremonies since 1896, and today humanist ceremonies are available in a number of countries, including Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and Iceland. In the past decade, demand for such services has grown significantly, as people have become more aware of their availability and the non-religious have felt increasingly emboldened to make a choice that genuinely reflects their own beliefs. However, not all humanists will have humanist ceremonies and there is no obligation for humanists to do so.



Human beings have engaged in cultural rituals and ceremonies since long before modern, organised religions arrived. Humanists will typically argue that what they are doing is simply fulfilling a human need that may have traditionally been fulfilled by religious practices, but need not be. The central thing that is different about a humanist ceremony is the absence of any reference to a deity. The person who has died, the couple getting married, or the baby who has been born are put at the centre of any ritual. At the same time, the community of family and friends are invested with the responsibility of 'bearing witness', humanising the experience.



Humanist ceremonies are tailored to be **personal** and **meaningful** to the people involved. Each ceremony is unique. Humanists typically see our relationships with other people as central to the human experience and it is these relationships that are often acknowledged in a humanist ceremony. They often involve speeches, poetry, music, song, feasting, and dancing, and they may sometimes include rituals. However, these are not 'humanist rituals'. They are personal rituals that people have chosen because they have meaning for them. What is important to humanists is that everyone should be free to choose how they mark the special moments in their lives.

Humanist Ceremonies

Humanist celebrants

A humanist celebrant is someone who works closely with the people at the centre of a ceremony to help create an event that is specific to the people involved.

Very often this will involve spending time with, and learning about, the people involved to help tell their story (or, at a naming ceremony, to celebrate the beginning of that story). Rather than following a set script, each script will be unique to that particular ceremony.



A personal perspective

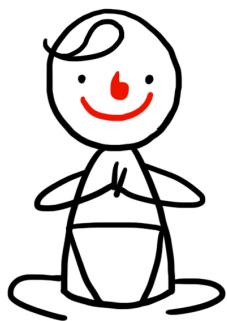
Zena Birch is a humanist celebrant who has been conducting humanist ceremonies since 2011.



'I'd say that pretty much every celebrant has very similar and very different answers to the question of what it is that makes you want to be a humanist celebrant. An interest in people, a fascination in the individual stories we all contain, and a desire to be able to share them. I have an old-fashioned belief that storytelling is probably one of our greatest gifts as human beings. Not because they're necessarily flights of fancy or imagination but because they're the ways that we get to communicate with one another. By sharing stories we become familiar with each other, we understand what we have in common. We also get to celebrate what our differences are, and being a humanist celebrant absolutely encapsulates understanding and inquiring into all of those things.'

Humanist naming ceremonies

Humanists believe that 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 child. A humanist naming ceremony can be held wherever the parents like and the parents can decide what they want to say.



Freedom is very important to humanists. The focus at a naming ceremony is often on the child's freedom to discover for themselves what they believe and to decide how they want to live. They highlight other people's **responsibility** to support the child to find happiness and to make the most of the one life they have. Typically, family and friends will make promises or offer advice to the new child. However, humanists believe we each need to be the authors of our own story, and have the opportunity to pursue our own passions and talents. In many ways, a humanist naming ceremony is a declaration of a child's **human rights**.



Humanists do not believe in a god, or they believe we cannot know whether or not a god exists. The **connections** we make with other people and the love and support they can offer is therefore very important to humanists. Sometimes parents will choose specific adults who promise to support the child as they grow (these are sometimes called 'guideparents').

The arrival of a new life can also provide a moment to reflect on how our own lives are changing, our evolving responsibilities, and on the circle of life.

Many humanists recognise how every new human being has the potential to lead a happy and fulfilling life as well as contribute to the wellbeing of others and to the progress of humanity. Every new life should therefore be acknowledged and celebrated.

'To celebrate a new life is an essential part of being human... every life is one which is filled with opportunity, filled with potential, and filled with so many possibilities...'

Simon, humanist celebrant



Making promises at a humanist naming ceremony

Statements from humanist naming ceremonies:

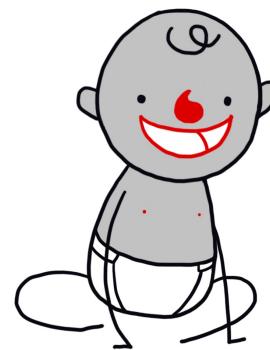
'We promise to use all our wisdom, patience, and love to help you fulfil yourself and help others throughout your life.'

'We have the responsibility to help you to develop your own opinions, beliefs, and values.'

'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.'

'A humanist naming ceremony is a very joyous occasion. It's the opportunity to welcome the child into the world... It's very important within a naming ceremony to acknowledge that we're not labelling the child in any way. We make it very clear that it is for the child to choose their path guided by those who are important to them.'

Isabel, humanist celebrant



'Humanists feel that this is the one life we each have. It's about each of us trying to find a way of living that is fulfilling and hopefully leaves something good behind for the generations to come... Most people I've worked with to put together naming ceremonies have chosen that way to welcome their child because they want their child to be free to decide for themselves when they're old enough what they do or don't believe.'

Hannah, humanist celebrant

Questions

- 1) How important is it that we mark important events in our lives with other people?
- 2) How free should children be to find their own path in life?

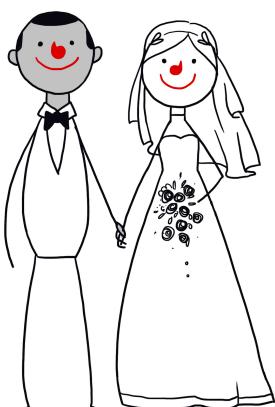


Humanist weddings



Freedom is very important to humanists. There are no special rules, traditions, or rituals at a humanist wedding. The couple are free to choose where and how to celebrate and they are encouraged to write their own promises to each other. There is no set pattern or script, which means every humanist ceremony will be unique. There will often be music and readings that have special meaning for the couple. Some humanists like the idea of symbolising their love for each other by performing rituals to represent their union (e.g. handfasting, lighting candles, mixing coloured sand). However, others feel no such symbolic action is necessary. What is important for humanists is that the ceremony is personal and meaningful to them.

Normally a humanist **celebrant** will work with the couple to create a ceremony that reflects the couple's wishes. They will also lead the ceremony on the day.



'It's a very creative process and the couple will create a ceremony that really has heart and meaning for them, that really reflects who they are, what their values are, what their relationship is, and the things that they want to build their marriage on together.'

Isabel,
humanist celebrant

'I love the person that you are and I promise to give you space to be yourself and to never try to change you. I promise to respect your opinions even if they are different from my own. I promise to talk and to listen, to trust and appreciate one another; to respect and cherish each other's uniqueness; and to support, comfort, and strengthen each other through life's joys and sorrows.'

A promise made at a humanist wedding

'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.'

A statement from a humanist celebrant's speech

Humanists do not believe in a god or believe we cannot know whether or not a god exists. The **connections** we make with other people and the love and support they can offer is therefore very important to many humanists. They believe 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 on the 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.

Equality and diversity

Humanists support equality and celebrate diversity. They believe we should be free to choose whom we love. Humanists have carried out ceremonies for same-sex couples for decades (before civil partnerships and same-sex marriages were legally recognised) and will often carry out weddings for couples with different religions or beliefs. They believe people should be free to choose whether they marry or not and whom they want to marry, and that both people should hold equal status in a marriage.

'What I personally like so much about the humanist approach is that there is no discrimination in who shall choose to marry, who shall choose to make those vows – it's the fact that they have chosen each other. That's what matters.'

Simon, humanist celebrant

Humanist marriage and the law

Unlike church marriages, humanist marriages are not currently legally recognised in England and Wales. If one has a humanist wedding, one also has to attend a register office to get married, although many humanists feel it is their humanist wedding that is their 'real' marriage. Humanists UK campaign against this inequality. In Scotland, where humanist marriages have been legally recognised since 2005, demand has soared, and there are now more humanist marriages each year than Church of Scotland and Catholic marriages combined. Since 2018, humanist marriages have also been legally recognised in Northern Ireland, where they are becoming increasingly popular. As of 2021, the other countries and territories that have legally recognised humanist weddings include Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey, Norway, Iceland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, and the United States.

Questions

- 1) How free should we be to personalise ceremonies?
- 2) How much do we rely on other people as a source of support in our lives?
- 3) Should humanist marriages be legally recognised?

Marriage and divorce

While humanists generally support marriage, there is no compulsion. Not everyone wants to get married. Not everyone has the option. Nor is it an essential feature of a healthy relationship. Humanists typically have no problem with cohabitation (unmarried couples living together). Humanists believe there are many different positive approaches to living and support freedom of choice.

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. Many feel married couples should try to work through any problems in their relationship. However, because humanists think this is the one life we have, they see divorce as acceptable if it reduces overall unhappiness. They accept that people can make mistakes.



Humanist funerals

'How shall we bury you?' said Crito.
'Any way you like,' replied Socrates.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates' reply draws attention to a feeling shared by many humanists: that a funeral should be for the living, not for the dead. We may have wishes about what happens to our body once we are gone. However, for many humanists, the main purpose of a funeral is to provide 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.



Humanists do not believe in an afterlife. Many therefore feel that the words and sentiment at a religious funeral would be inappropriate for them.

A humanist funeral is conducted by a humanist **celebrant** and there will often be music and readings chosen by the deceased or by family and friends. There will be space for sadness and an honest recognition that a life has ended. Sharing stories about the deceased can support the grieving process and help people to remember them. Rather than prayers, there will often be time for reflection.

'We recognise that this is the end of a life, the person is dead and we are saying goodbye, at the same time as celebrating the fact that this person lived. They created many profound relationships, many memories. They have a legacy that they're leaving in the children that they created, in works they've left behind. When we commit somebody within a humanist funeral ceremony, we're not committing them to god. We are committing them to the hearts and minds and memories of those people who loved them and whose lives they impacted, and whose lives they will continue to impact. For us, in a sense, that's the afterlife.'

Isabel, humanist celebrant

Connections are important to many humanists. Joy and meaning can be found in recognising the impact someone has had on our lives and on the world around them – an impact that can live on. For humanists, we live on through our children (if we have them), in people's memories, and through the contributions we made to society. A humanist funeral can also act as a reminder to those gathered that, while we are alive, we should make the most of our time in the here and now.

'We are beings who are connected and through the funeral we're able to bring those connections together and allow people to see not just an opportunity to release grief, which will happen in many cases, but more frequently for people to actually see joy in the fact that somebody has been part of their life and has changed their life indelibly.'

Simon, humanist celebrant



Humanists UK has been conducting funerals since 1896 and humanist funerals are becoming increasingly popular (there were over 8,000 in the UK in 2019). The humanist approach is also beginning to influence other types of funerals.

Questions

- 1) What comfort can be found following the death of a loved one for those who do not believe in an afterlife?
- 2) What words and sentiments do you think you might find in a eulogy at a humanist funeral?

