

Why more couples are saying . . . 'I do' . . . at a humanist wedding

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If a couple choose to have a humanist wedding, you can be fairly sure they are serious about it. They are certainly not doing it simply for the sake of a piece of paper. If for the sake of convenience, they just wanted to be legally married, they would go to their local registrar. Nor are they likely to be doing it for the sake of appearances, or for their parents' sake. In so choosing, the humanist approach can best represent how they think and feel about themselves and their life views.

A small minority opt for a humanist ceremony because it offers an acceptable compromise between two religious traditions – Muslim and Christian, for instance – and that's usually OK for those concerned. Humanism, as we often remind people, is the bit most of us agree on . . . namely that we should live by an ethical code and behave considerately. We differ only in our reasons for so doing. So in those circumstances, we are happy to celebrate our common humanity in a humanist wedding ceremony. Humanist Marriage Officers will always introduce themselves as representatives of humanism, accredited by GRO - Scotland. We won't introduce hymns or prayers, but nor do we require the bride and groom to swear any kind of humanist oath. If either one or both of them retains a vestige of religious belief, that is entirely their business. Like so many of us, they are cultural christians.

For the vast majority however, a humanist wedding is a deliberate and positive decision by two people who have no reliance on religious faith, but want a wedding ceremony that is personal to them - one which celebrates their love, along with the people, the ideas and things they most care about. Our job is to make that happen for them, so when we make first contact, we usually tell them how we propose to go about it.

There are three priorities. The first is to engage the audience. As humanists, we have no prescribed rituals, with the result that many people are not sure what to expect. So we think it's important to put them in the picture as quickly as possible. Does this diminish the importance of the ceremony? Surely not.

The humanist ceremony is far more important than just the legal procedure, for it is about the couple's most personal feelings and aspirations. It is about declaring their love in front of their nearest and dearest, and embarking upon married life on their own terms, openly and according to their beliefs. Everyone needs to feel equally included, whatever they believe, which is why it is sometimes appropriate, if the couple so chooses, to include a moment's silent reflection before their vows, for everyone's private thoughts or prayers. There are other ways of involving the principal players and guests, like involvement in presenting the rings, presenting a personal tribute, passing the couple's rings round, or asking everyone to join in a communal declaration of support for the couple, or a favoured song. That is their choice.

The second priority is to tell the couple's story. People want to know how they got together and to appreciate, in some detail, how they complement each other. The bride and groom are encouraged to confide, so that their guests gain a privileged insight into their lives, with probably the occasional laugh, even at their expense. The result should be, that by the time we come to the vows, everyone will be rooting for them to make a success of their life together.

Thirdly, to explain why marriage represents a deep commitment, and why it will take their relationship to a new level. There are many appropriate readings and extracts, like from Laurie Lee's wonderful essay on love; or they may have some piece of writing that is precious to them; or they may trust in the celebrant finding the appropriate words. But they will have the final say – the wedding script will be theirs, unique . . . theirs alone. It tells of who and what they are. Wonderful . . . inspiring. . . and so memorable.