

Submission to the Joint Committee on Human Rights on the Law on Marriage as it Pertains to Non-Religious Beliefs, from the British Humanist Association. June 2009.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) wishes to propose to the JCHR a subject for a short enquiry - the law on marriage as it pertains to non-religious beliefs.

Humanism is a non-religious belief system or lifescape. It provides for its adherents answers to so-called 'ultimate questions' in much the same way as religions do for their followers, providing an approach to understanding the world and a framework for ethical judgements. A brief outline of Humanism is attached at Annex 1.

Humanists - broadly, ethically concerned non-religious people - are represented in the UK by the British Humanist Association (BHA), the national charity representing the interests of this large and growing population. It exists to support and represent such people, who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. One way it does so is to provide a ceremonies service, enabling people to have humanist funerals, baby-namings and weddings, as further described below.

The BHA is committed to equality, human rights and democracy, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society, and an end to irrelevant discrimination of all sorts. As a member organisation of both the Equality and Diversity Forum (EDF) and the Discrimination Law Association, the BHA works with other organisations to advance equal treatment on every ground and has participated in consultations and prepared submissions on recent legislation and policy proposals. Our Chief Executive served on the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Steering Group and on the Reference Group for the Equalities Review and Discrimination Law Review.

All human rights instruments, including in particular the European Convention on Human Rights and hence the Human Rights Act, protect the freedom of 'religion or belief'. Humanism is a 'belief' and is therefore protected equally with any religion. Under sn.6 of the Human Rights Act the government and all public authorities are required not to discriminate on the basis of religion or belief. Much recent legislation has guaranteed the equality of religions and non-religious beliefs - notably the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 and the Equality Act 2006.

In practice, however, the law remains unequal in many ways - partly because of specific exemptions for religious bodies from non-discrimination provisions and partly because pre-existing laws have not been amended or re-interpreted using the provisions of sn 3 of the Human Rights Act.

One example of this inequality that is of particular concern to the British Humanist Association is the law on marriage in England and Wales.

For several decades the BHA has run a ceremonies service. We train and organise celebrants to conduct ceremonies to mark 'rites of passage' - births, marriages and funerals and other significant occasions. Every humanist ceremony is prepared individually to meet the wishes and needs of the families, couples and individuals concerned. For a funeral, the celebrant meets with the bereaved family to plan the ceremony, write the funeral script, including personal tributes from family and friends as appropriate, and choose music, poetry and readings. For weddings, affirmations and baby namings, the celebrant may meet with the couple or family several times to agree the words to be used and choreograph the whole ceremony. A brief description of the organisation of our ceremonies service is at Annex 2.

The ceremonies we provide maintain a high standard of excellence that has been widely commented on. We know from other funeral providers and training organisations that the quality of our ceremonies has led to the demand for better quality elsewhere, and it has often been suggested

that the increasing tendency for religious funerals to be more personalised is a direct result of observation by the clergy and others of humanist practice.

Demand for our ceremonies – especially funerals – has grown rapidly in recent years: in 2008 the BHA’s trained and accredited celebrants conducted 7,000 ceremonies; we expect this number to double by 2011.

Unfortunately, humanists suffer a serious disadvantage by comparison with the religious so far as concerns marriage ceremonies. Most couples seeking a religious ceremony are able to choose one that is legally recognised, but humanist weddings in England and Wales have no legal recognition or validity. Those who seek a humanist wedding ceremony and want the protection afforded by law to married couples need to go through two ceremonies, one conducted by the Registrar and the other conducted by an accredited humanist celebrant.

In Scotland, following representations made by the Humanist Society of Scotland to the General Register Office for Scotland, the Registrar General, seeking, as we understand it, to comply with the Human Rights Act, made use of section 12 of the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 to authorise Humanist celebrants to conduct legal humanist weddings. Weddings conducted by registered humanist celebrants have been legal in Scotland since June 2005. In the ceremony, a celebrant who is accredited by the Registrar-General in Scotland asks each of the couple: 'X, will you please repeat after me the following words: "I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, X, solemnly and sincerely accept you, Y, as my lawfully wedded wife/husband".'

In England and Wales, similar representations to the Registrar-General and to the Ministry of Justice (at the time, the Lord Chancellor’s Department) have produced no similar result - nor any sign of willingness to take any action to correct what is surely an injustice. It must be admitted that there is no such easy solution as was available in Scotland. There is, for example, no obvious possibility of using sn.3 of the Human Rights Act to produce a solution: the nature of the law in England and Wales is entirely different from that in Scotland, being based (for purely historic reasons) primarily on the place where a wedding is conducted rather than on authorisation of persons to conduct and register weddings.

It may not at first sight seem that humanists suffer any major disadvantage, given the availability of civil marriage in a register office. Far from it. Humanist ceremonies are celebrations of occasions of high significance for those involved. Each is shaped to meet the personal wishes of the participants, and they are all founded on the shared values and beliefs of Humanism. A humanist ceremony is therefore more than, and different to, a merely secular occasion. A humanist wedding is not just a register office wedding with added music and poetry readings: after all, the registrar, however sympathetic, may well not share humanist values and may even be personally opposed to Humanism.¹

We also know that more and more English and Welsh couples are travelling to Scotland specifically in order that they can have a legal humanist wedding. Around 8%² of all humanist weddings

¹It is also arguable that a civil wedding is not allowed to be distinctive of Humanism, since sn.3 of the Human Rights Act would suggest that the bar on any religious content in a civil ceremony should be re-interpreted as a bar on any content distinctive of a religion *or belief*. Indeed, some registrars are using this interpretation to threaten hotels and the like that they may lose their registration as ‘approved premises’ for civil weddings if they also host non-statutory humanist weddings.

² Figures obtained from the Humanist Society of Scotland, May 2009

conducted in Scotland in 2008 were for English and Welsh couples, and this is a figure that has been rising year on year.

Unlike the followers of religions, therefore, humanists do not have the option of a legal marriage ceremony based on their “religion or belief” and conducted by officiants of their own “religion or belief”. Our celebrants share values and a view of the world with our wedding couples. The same is normally true for couples seeking to be married within the faith traditions with the minister or priest of their choosing. However, it is not normally the case with Registrars, for whom sharing their clients’ values is rightly not required and who are in any case rightly constrained from any sign of commitment to a particular religion or belief.

It is our view that humanist couples should be afforded the same right to a marriage ceremony reflecting their own lifstance or belief system as are those who have religious faith. This is no idle demand: couples who have been through humanist weddings have told us in strong terms and large numbers that they regard their humanist wedding as their real wedding and that they resent strongly the need to have an additional civil ceremony. Some of their comments are at Annex 3.

Reform

The modern law in England and Wales derives from Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753 and is found now in the Marriage Act, 1949, as (frequently) amended. The law is complex, partly as a result of being so drafted and amended as to accommodate numerous religious groups. The 1753 Act already included special provisions to allow for Quaker and Jewish marriages to be legally recognised. The 1836 Act not only introduced civil marriage: it also introduced a scheme for registration of places of worship where marriages might be solemnised, so enfranchising Roman Catholics and non-conformists and ultimately the adherents of any religion that has buildings for purposes of worship³. In some cases, the ministers or equivalent of the religion are authorised to conduct the civil elements of the marriage and to maintain a register on behalf of the registrar-general, in others a registrar is required to attend the ceremony and administer these declarations.

Humanists, however, having no deity to worship, have no places of worship. It is therefore impossible for us to take advantage of this route to contrive that our marriage ceremonies have legal effect. What we need is a specific provision in the law such as the Hardwicke Act included for the Quakers and Jews two hundred and fifty years ago.⁴

³ Quasi-model for the registration procedure from the 1949 Act:

43. Appointment of authorised persons.

(1) For the purpose of enabling marriages to be solemnized in a registered building without the presence of a registrar, the trustees or governing body of that building may authorise a person to be present at the solemnization of marriages in that building and, where a person is so authorised in respect of any registered building, the trustees or governing body of that building shall, within the prescribed time and in the prescribed manner, certify the name and address of the person so authorised to the Registrar General and to the superintendent registrar of the registration district in which the building is situated.

[Provided that, in relation to a building which becomes registered after the thirty-first day of December, nineteen hundred and fifty-eight, the power conferred by this subsection to authorise a person to be present as aforesaid shall not be exercisable before the expiration of one year from the date of registration of the building or, where the congregation on whose behalf the building is registered previously used for the purpose of public religious worship another building of which the registration has been cancelled not earlier than one month before the date of registration aforesaid, one year from the date of registration of that other building.]

(2) Any person whose name and address have been certified as aforesaid is in this Act referred to as an “authorised person”.

⁴Our understanding of the law as it applies to the Jewish religion is that each synagogue may license people who may then conduct marriages in any location so long as the people getting married are members of the relevant synagogue. We have explored the possibility of using sn.3 of the Human Rights Act to interpret the legal provision concerning Jewish weddings as applying also to ourselves, with the whole BHA (or constituent

When we have sought reform, it has been suggested to us that nothing is possible short of a wholesale reform of the whole law, which would plainly benefit from rationalisation. Such a reform, however, is not at present planned and would in any case take many years and much argument.

We are not satisfied that the law cannot once again be amended, as it has been previously to accommodate new demands. This is a human rights issue, and we suggest that provisions could easily be introduced in England and Wales on similar lines to the law in Scotland. We suggest that the Registrar-General be empowered to designate organisations based on a religion or belief that do not possess buildings registered for (or capable of registration for) worship and thereby confer on them the power to nominate suitable persons to the Registrar-General. Upon his approval they should be authorised to solemnise marriages according to the customs of the relevant religion or belief. Additional provisions might require advance notice to be given to the local superintending registrar of any wedding and might allow the superintending registrar at his discretion to require that a registrar should attend the ceremony and administer the civil declarations.

We would envisage that under any such scheme the Registrar-General would designate the British Humanist Association in respect of humanist ceremonies, and that we should nominate for approval only those of our celebrants who had successfully completed both our basic training and our detailed training for weddings, which would in the event be supplemented with training in the statutory duties entailed. (A note on our training schemes is included in Annex 2.)

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regions of it as organised to conduct ceremonies) treated in the same way as a single synagogue. We have been told, however, that this is not feasible.

ANNEX 1

HUMANISM IN SHORT

Humanism is not an “-ism” - it has no source book of unquestionable rules or doctrine. You don't ‘convert’ to Humanism and then have to take the rough with the smooth. Instead, Humanism is a label for a certain range of beliefs and attitudes. If you share these beliefs and attitudes, you may like to call yourself a humanist. It is not just a negative response to religion but a positive belief system in its own right.

Here is a quick run-down on Humanist beliefs and attitudes:

- It is part of human nature to have moral values - the result of our evolution as social animals. All lifestances - religious and non-religious - share the ‘Golden Rule’ (‘behave to others as you would wish them to behave to you’). But beyond such basic values we are responsible for our personal moral principles and decisions. In making moral decisions we need to use our knowledge, reason and experience. We should consider the available evidence and assess the likely outcomes of alternative decisions, not rely on any dogma or sacred text or infallible authority figure.
- When it comes to understanding life and the universe, the naturalistic and provisional explanations provided by scientific enquiry and the use of reason are the best available. It is folly to turn to other sources - such as religion or superstition - for answers to unanswered questions. So there is no good reason to believe in any god or gods or afterlife.
- This is the only life we have. It is our responsibility to make life as good as possible not just for ourselves but for everyone - including future generations. This means that individual human rights and freedoms are immensely important - but so are individual responsibility, social cooperation and mutual respect.
- The best way to organise society is for people of fundamentally different beliefs and lifestyles to live cooperatively together, with shared institutions, laws and government that are neutral on questions of belief - that is, ‘secular’.
- In your individual life you can create meaning and purpose for yourself by adopting worthwhile goals and endeavouring to live your life to the full. Feel awe at the immensity of the universe and the intricate nature of its workings. Find inspiration in the richness of the natural world, in music, the arts, the achievements of the past and the possibilities of the future. Find fulfilment in worthwhile activity, in physical recreation and endeavour and in the pleasures of human interaction, affection and love.

ANNEX 2

SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE BHA'S HUMANIST CEREMONIES NETWORK OF TRAINED AND ACCREDITED HUMANIST CELEBRANTS



The need for ritual or ceremony to mark significant events is as old as humanity itself. Most of us want to mark important events in our lives and to commemorate people we have loved when they die. It is just as important for those with no religious belief to mark life's significant occasions fully and appropriately, as it is for those who are religious.

Members of the British Humanist Association (BHA) began conducting humanist funerals, wedding and baby naming ceremonies for other BHA members, friends and acquaintances in 1967 – perhaps even before that. Books published by these early humanist celebrants (such as Jane Wynne Willson's *Funerals Without God, Sharing the Future* and *New Arrivals*, or Nigel Collins' *Seasons of Life*) continue to be used and consulted by many celebrants, even religious ones.

Humanist Ceremonies (TM) is the British Humanist Association's network of trained and celebrants in England and Wales, who conduct humanist funerals, weddings, partnership and baby naming ceremonies. The network currently consists of 260 celebrants; they conducted 7000 humanist ceremonies in 2008.

Most humanist ceremonies conducted are funerals – over 90%. However, demands for humanist weddings are increasing: our celebrants in England and Wales conducted 293 in 2007 and 389 in 2008. We know that many more couples in England and Wales would have a humanist wedding if only their humanist wedding ceremony had legal status – as it would do in Scotland, Norway or Australia, for instance. (In Scotland 425 humanist wedding ceremonies were conducted in 2006 – only a year after humanist weddings obtained legal status there. In 2007, [710 were conducted, rising to 1025 in 2008](#)).

The Humanist Ceremonies network is managed by the Ceremonies Management Committee (CMC), a body consisting of elected celebrants and two appointed BHA Trustees; its activities are directed by the BHA's Head of Ceremonies. Its aim is to provide a humanist ceremony to anyone who wants one. To achieve that, the BHA is intent on expanding its network of celebrants and on ensuring that the quality of the humanist ceremonies it offers is second to none.

One reason why the BHA has been intent upon expanding its Humanist Ceremonies network is to meet a growing need for non-religious ceremonies which also reflect people's values and imbue the occasion, or event, with significance. A survey commissioned by the BHA in 2001 (Ipsos/MORI) showed that some 36% of the UK population live their lives by broadly humanist principles. The 23rd British Social Attitudes survey recently found that over two-thirds of people (69%) either did not claim membership of a religion or said that they never attended a religious service. Civil marriages in register offices outnumber church weddings and between them the Catholic Church and the Church

of England have seen christenings decline by 61%, in England, over the last 45 years. In short, while religious ritual is no longer the default option for many, an official civil or secular ceremony is insufficiently meaningful or personal.

Each of the ceremonies that a BHA- accredited celebrant conducts is unique, created especially for the people involved and based on shared human and humanist values with no dependency on religion or superstition. Emphasis and focus are placed on the occasion and on the person or people being celebrated or commemorated. BHA- accredited celebrants plan each ceremony in close consultation with the people involved to ensure it fits and reflects their wishes, their occasion, their values, their life stories. The celebrant will not only script the ceremony but help choreograph it too and of course, will conduct the ceremony on the date and within the time required.

Being a celebrant, particularly one accredited by the BHA, is demanding.

Applicants for the BHA's Humanist Ceremonies training courses are rigorously scrutinised. They have to complete and submit an application form, are interviewed in person and on the phone and have their applications assessed by a trainer and by local peers. Applicants are not admitted onto a training course unless they can show evidence of finely-tuned, highly developed interpersonal skills, excellent interviewing and writing skills and immaculate use of English; good organisational skills and excellent presentational skills. They are also required to provide evidence of their professional aptitudes and experience and two character references which attest to their honesty and integrity.

Then, training courses take place on four intensive days over an initial three month period. As well as attending the training course days, trainees are required to submit several pieces of work for assessment. A further probationary stage has to be passed in which probationers are mentored and required to observe other celebrants' consultations with clients, observe other celebrants' ceremonies, have their scripts checked and amended and their own ceremonies observed. At all stages, Humanist Ceremonies asserts the need for maintaining the highest standards – as this extract from the requirements we make of applicants shows:

'High standards. Each ceremony you conduct will be unique. Each ceremony will be one of the most important events in the lives of the people concerned. You will often be dealing with people who are highly emotionally charged. You will be expected to deliver something exceptional. So, it follows that you will need to be an exceptional person, always determined to give of your best.'

The BHA's Humanist Ceremonies trainers are all trained and accredited celebrants themselves, have undertaken special training to be trainers with the BHA as well as (in many cases) having training and education experience in other professional backgrounds.

It is ironic that the BHA's training courses for humanist celebrants provided a model for the training of humanist celebrants in Scotland – where humanist weddings, conducted by trained and approved celebrants, have legal status.

The BHA's Humanist Ceremonies is vigilant about the professional standards of its accredited celebrants and is constantly addressing the need to improve these. In 2008 and 2009 it has provided additional training for mentoring trainee celebrants, provides continuous professional development (CPD) sessions at its annual Humanist Ceremonies conference, regional meetings and in an additional schedule of CPD courses. Complaints are dealt with by the Head of Ceremonies and by the Ceremonies Management Committee, with reference to the BHA's Chief Executive if necessary.

ANNEX 3

STATEMENTS BY COUPLES ON THE NEED FOR REFORM

A:

Having carefully considered how we wished to celebrate our marriage we were delighted with our Humanist wedding, a unique opportunity to construct a personal and meaningful ceremony. **We were extremely disappointed that to make our marriage legal we were required to go through a registry office ceremony** – we very much viewed our humanist ceremony as our wedding and it felt unnecessary, and slightly uncomfortable that we were forced down this route.

We would very much welcome a change in the law allowing registered celebrants to conduct legally recognised wedding ceremonies.

B:

Neither my husband or I are religious but we still wanted to celebrate our union in front of friends and family so we decided on a humanist ceremony. **Unfortunately we also had to go through the formality of 'actually' getting married in a registry office that morning. We chose the shortest ceremony possible and chose not to exchange rings as we felt our true exchange of vows would be taking place that afternoon.** We met the registrar that morning for the first time, whereas our humanist celebrant . . . had spent a considerable amount of time with us in order to really get to know us and personalise our ceremony.

I see no reason why a humanist ceremony should not be legally binding and would fully support such a decision.

C:

My partner and I plan to have a humanist ceremony when we marry . . . We are both not religious, yet felt **we wanted something more special meaningful and personal that what a civil ceremony offered. It is a huge inconvenience to have to 'marry' at the registry office beforehand** - having to arrange extra travel, organising etc. Ben and I are viewing this as the 'legal bit', and as such plan to keep it as brief as possible: **so far as we are concerned we will be truly married at the humanist ceremony in the presence of our friends and family!!**

Even so, I am concerned about having to marry in a registry office as I have heard they can be a little 'pushy', and have certain 'set opinions' about humanist ceremonies and the 'type of people' who chose to express their commitment in this way.

Neither Ben or I are new age oddballs, but adults who know their own minds, have their own values and opinions and want a ceremony which reflects these. Alison [the humanist celebrant] has been so friendly and helpful so far and I believe she will help to make our day truly special.

D:

[W]e'd have preferred not to have gone to the Registry Office and just had our [humanist] ceremony. So all strength to your argument.

E:

My partner and I have been together for 10 years and have two children so when we finally decided we had the time and money to get married **we wanted a ceremony that would reflect that it was a cementing of our relationship, not the start of it, as so much of the registry or church ceremony seems to suggest.** I come from a family of non believers and although I have never been a member of the humanist society I have always believed passionately in everything that the society stands for

(I am a human rights campaigner by trade). The natural place to seek advice for our wedding was the society. After just a few moments of speaking to Alison I knew that it was the right decision for us. Being able to design our ceremony so that it included most importantly our children, but also our family and friends, and that it could talk about our relationship as a whole, not just the start of a marriage was very important to us. The icing on the cake (really bad pun sorry) was that we could have the ceremony anywhere we liked, in our case outside on the terrace of the yacht club where I grew up which was like a second home for me as a child. The yacht club didn't want to apply for a licensed premise marriage licence as events at the club are only open to members and therefore a licence would be unlikely to pay for itself, especially as they don't take event bookings in July and August. But **then we hit the wall of having to have two ceremonies.**

Dan, who isn't really into the idea of publicly talking about our relationship, really didn't want to do it twice and we both struggled with how to make the second ceremony (humanist) have more meaning when we were already married. Coupled with much grumbling from our family about why we were doing it twice, it all got a bit difficult. We decided that the best bet would be to have the two ceremonies one after the other in very close venues, just us and parents at the registry, followed by the humanist wedding. Not perfect but the best compromise. Problem was that we then discovered that the registrars were all booked until 4pm on the day we had set which would push things really late with a second humanist ceremony and then the reception. So with great regret as we had booked so much by this point, we had to pull out of the humanist ceremony.

So the bottom line is that we get married in 10 days time in a dull registry office ceremony which does not do the justice a humanist ceremony could have done to our relationship. Yes, we have written our own vows but we could never have done it as eloquently as Alison and we are only allowed a couple of additions to the statutory words. We both feel that we have been discriminated against not because of our religion, but because we haven't got one at all.

F:

My partner and I have decided to have a humanist ceremony this July. Our decision was based on the fact that we both do not have religious beliefs and felt that a church wedding would be inappropriate. In addition **we felt that a registry office ceremony did not properly allow us to convey our commitment to one another but represents a legal formality that has to be undertaken. Our humanist ceremony represents our "real" wedding.**

G:

Last year my wife and I had a humanist ceremony . . . It was a dream day! We were able to have the ceremony in a clearing in the woods on the banks of the River Dart, an enchanting location. We were able to totally write our vows that reflected our own values of life and love and were also compatible with those of humanism. This was a wonderful process that allowed us to really look at our relationship and what it was and what we wanted it to be. The ceremony was relaxed and moving. Several couples we know who were there and had pretty much decided that getting married was pointless were inspired by what we were able to create and are now planning their own 'dream days'.

It was a major frustration that this ceremony was not recognised by the state and that we had to go through a meaningless legal ceremony at additional cost two weeks before the humanist ceremony. Additionally some people commented that the ceremony was not a 'real wedding' and just some hippy thing. It was not! For us it was a dream come true and we could not have imagined having a more relaxed and enjoyable occasion than the one we had that day.

In today's secular society I think it is time to recognise humanist weddings as a legal process through which people want to get married.

H:

After a very happy and meaningful wedding in September of 2005 I'd like to write with my thoughts on humanist weddings.

Legally my husband and I were committed to attending the Register Office in Honiton on the morning of our wedding despite our Humanist wedding taking place at 2pm the same day some 10 miles away. Following months of planning, discussions with our humanist celebrant and our personal sense of importance & legality (plus love and happiness) **we didn't feel the Register office meeting was anything more than a level of bureaucracy** in an otherwise very romantic & well considered day.

In our instance we had a small group of 15 people (including bride and groom). We were initially disappointed to learn how difficult it was to get married in a beautiful location with the people that matter. Despite religious backgrounds neither thought a church was appropriate and our wedding party was too small to hire any of the hotels registered for weddings. The Humanist Association provided a perfect solution that combined the importance of marriage, a respect for our love and personal taste with a celebrant who appropriately formalised the occasion .

Register offices are, by their very nature Government buildings and therefore lack the atmosphere appropriate for a marriage where people want to celebrate.

My husband and I fully support any changes removing the need to attend a register office when marrying at Humanist ceremony. Our experience shows a celebrant to be appropriately sincere and authoritative whilst working with the wishes of the bride & groom and more than capable of representing the Government to register the marriage.

I:

Gary and I are getting married in July in a private residence in a humanist ceremony, we are very excited at the prospect of having our vows affirmed in this way. However **it would be altogether better if we didn't have to go to the registry office beforehand which I do think is spoiling the magic a little. It does seem to be strange in this day and age that we still have to be married in a registry office for it to be legal.**

In our eyes the wedding will be the humanist ceremony and I think that should be all we have to go through to be married.

J:

[O]ur wedding ceremony . . . was the most amazing day of our lives - **we were disappointed to find out that the ceremony would not be recognised by law and felt that the additional trip to the registrar's office was unnecessary** - we still regard the 28th May as our anniversary, not the date we signed the marriage certificate!

K:

I believe it is not only unnecessary but clinical to have go the registry office to confirm something that we as a couple already know. I believe that our beautiful ceremony is proof enough that we are a married couple.

L:

As a non religious couple who are getting married in July, **we feel annoyed that we are having to go through a civil registration ceremony, as well as the Humanist ceremony.** It would be simpler,

cheaper, and more in keeping with our beliefs to just have the one Humanist ceremony, anywhere we like, with a Humanist celebrant. . . It is now legal in Scotland, why not in England?

M:

Natalie and I were married on August 6th last year in a [humanist] ceremony . . . But of course **this hugely significant event had no significance in the eyes of English law**; we had to arrange an additional civil ceremony on the morning of our Wedding in order to sign the marriage certificate etc because our Humanist ceremony was conducted outdoors.

As far as I am aware marriages may only be conducted by licensed registrars on premises licensed for marriage ceremonies. We feel that this law needs to change and would gladly have dispensed with our Register Office ceremony had we been given the option.

Our Humanist ceremony was incredible; a truly unique and wonderful experience for all to witness and share, not least for Natalie and me. The only important element of our register office ceremony was to sign official documents and utter specific phrases to each other so that our marriage was recognised in Law.

We would welcome a review of the current Law and due process and I am sure that many couples that have chosen to contact the BHA would also. Could registered BHA celebrants be licensed to conduct marriages and handle the relevant paperwork? Would it be possible for them to conduct Wedding ceremonies in any location? Is it really necessary for couples to exchange vows/promises which include specific phrases? With the relevant paperwork completed (notice of intention to marry etc) and displayed in a Register office for a two week period surely that is evidence enough that both people are aware of the commitment and bond that is represented by their marriage, as is their signature on the marriage certificate?

If it had been possible to sign a legally recognised marriage certificate at our Humanist ceremony it would have been much easier for us. The words spoken by Alison and exchanged between us in the presence of gathered friends and family were hugely important for us, and not the brief 'conveyor belt bureaucracy ' style ceremony conducted earlier the same day at the Register office.