

What is a Humanist Wedding and Why is it Becoming Popular?

According to [Brides.com](https://www.brides.com), the months from late spring to early fall are generally considered to be “wedding season.” My fellow Alcuin Fellows and I found that we each know roughly half a dozen or so couples that have gotten engaged in the past year, and have noticed the summer wedding trend.

A wedding [trend](#) that I was previously unaware of, but is growing in popularity and facing legal challenges in the UK, is that of humanist weddings. A recent [article](#) in *The Guardian* explained that, following a court ruling enabling soccer player Eunan O’Kane and his fiancée, model Laura Lacole, to have a humanist wedding last year, the appeals court has declined to grant legal status to humanist weddings.

Naturally, I was curious. What is a humanist wedding, and why is its legal status currently disputed?

A humanist wedding is officiated by a humanist celebrant, an individual within the humanist community who has been ordained to oversee significant life events, such as a wedding, from a humanist perspective. The ceremony usually contains religious elements, often drawing from multiple religious traditions, without any mention of God.

It turns out that the legal battle in which O’Kane and Lacole found themselves comes down to differences in marriage laws in the UK and the US. In the US, it is relatively [easy](#) to get ordained, and there are multiple online organizations that will help you get ordained with just a few clicks of the mouse. (See [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) The legitimacy of this ordination [varies](#) from state to state, but is generally recognized as valid. Aside from a [snafu](#) over the use of a Christian chapel for a humanist wedding in 2013, humanist

weddings have gone on with little controversy and little attention in the US.

In the UK, on the other hand, a wedding may either be a [religious](#) ceremony, generally performed by the Church of England, or a civil ceremony, which has no mention of religion. A [humanist](#) wedding falls into neither category.

A religious wedding in the UK typically follows one of three set scripts from the Anglican church, and a civil ceremony must be strictly non-religious. This provides little room for a customized ceremony, hence the draw of the humanist wedding. In the first ten years after their legalization in Scotland, which has slightly [different](#) marriage laws from the rest of the UK because of the separate establishment of the Church of Scotland, humanist weddings skyrocketed in popularity, [outnumbering](#) weddings in the national Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church.

For the rest of the UK, the court determined that under current law couples are able to obtain temporary authorization for a humanist wedding, which is what O’Kane and Lacle did, but the appeal to change the wording of the law to include “or beliefs” where it currently only says religion was [denied](#).

This is where we get into some of the complications of humanism. In general, humanists consider themselves as [non-religious](#). Some groups, especially in the US, have [accepted](#) the designation “humanist religion,” but many [push back](#) on this, arguing that humanism is a secular belief system because humanists do not believe in any supernatural higher power.

Humanists UK [describes](#) a wedding as “too personal” an occasion for a set script. What I found interesting was the way that, while emphasizing a shift toward individuality, humanist weddings generally draw from traditional aspects of religious weddings. Louise Ridley, writing for the [Huffington Post](#) about her experience having a humanist wedding says, “In our case, a humanist wedding meant a tailor-made ceremony, keeping the traditions we liked and tweaking or ditching those we didn’t.”

The emphasis on the individual in Western culture is certainly not limited to weddings. But the intriguing thing is, in the midst of the turn toward the individual, there also appears to be an ever-increasing desire for [tradition](#). The rise of [vintage fashion](#) as well as the popularity of “[rustic](#)” interior design and [weddings](#) indicate an almost nostalgic yearning for the past.

For all the emphasis on individual expression, people still seem to be attracted to tradition, even ceremony and liturgy. It is interesting that with religious “nones” becoming the [second largest](#) religious group in North America and most of Europe, we are also observing the emerging popularity of humanist weddings and even an [atheist church](#).

Perhaps the modern emphasis on individuality is revealing a desire for the connectedness and tradition that has historically been found in religion.

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