

We need ceremony in our lives
by Lloyd Robertson

Many people have dropped religion from their lives. Lloyd Robertson interviewed one such person who chairs the Humanist Association of Canada's "Ceremonies Committee". Simon Parcher talked with Lloyd about the importance of ceremony.

Robertson: Simon, you must be encouraged by the 2001 census showing that the percentage of people in Canada having no religion has tripled in the last 20 years to 18.5% of the population.

Parcher: The rate at which this segment of the population is growing is quite remarkable. Canadians who have no religion form the second largest group in religion statistics, next to Catholics. It is indeed encouraging that so many people are adopting a naturalistic view of existence and believing less in the supernatural.

Robertson: Humanist officiants perform marriage ceremonies. Why would people with no religion need such a ceremony? Why not just go before a Justice of the Peace?

Parcher: Humans have an innate need to celebrate that pre-dates the emergence of organized religion. The birth of a child, the marriage of one's children and the passing of loved ones are all major events in our lives that we want to share and celebrate with our family, friends and community.

As religious traditions emerged and rose to power in society, they assumed control of these important events in life and claimed that they could be properly celebrated only by paying homage to the gods of religions. It was not long before the celebration of rites of passage were primarily religious events, often to the point where the participants themselves were not celebrated nearly as much as the gods. In contrast, humanist ceremonies focus on the significance of the occasion and the participants.

Robertson: As a counsellor I often suggest to people that they attend the funerals of loved ones as a way of accepting the fact of death, a necessary step in the grieving process. I imagine that Humanist funerals accept the fact of death with more finality than Christian funerals.

Parcher: That is correct. Humanists celebrate the life of the individual who has died and accept the fact that humans, like all other things in nature, live and die, then no longer exist.

Robertson: Ministers and priests often comfort the bereaved with phrases like "She has gone to a better place" or "He was called". What do your officiants say to comfort the grieving?

Parcher: Humanist Officiants do not give grieving relatives the hope that loved ones continue to exist in a sacred dimension with the supernatural gods. Our Officiants remind those present that the deceased will live on in a sense through their children and other relatives, and also through the legacy of their work and other constructive things they did while alive. They will also exist in the memories of those who knew them, loved them, and learned from them.

Robertson: A pamphlet published by your organization says "Humanists believe that the human species has evolved as - and remains as - part of nature". This emphasis on nature sounds similar to the approach of traditional aboriginal teachings. How is this identification with nature or the cosmos reflected in your ceremonies?

Parcher: Humanists ceremonies have no supernatural elements but they usually incorporate beautiful readings and poems that express and celebrate our oneness with nature. It is true that Humanism's naturalistic outlook does have aspects in common with aboriginal teachings and several other earth base religions, such as Wicca. Examples of commonalities are a respect for the earth and an appreciation for the life that it enables us to have.

Robertson: What other ceremonies do you perform in addition to marriages and funerals?

Parcher: The most common other ceremonies are child namings, gay unions, and reaffirmation of wedding vows. In the past 2-3 years there has also been an increasing demand for undoctination ceremonies. Undoctination ceremonies provide participants with the occasion to formally shed all vestiges of religious indoctrination by publically renouncing past affiliation with religion.

Robertson: I can see priests and ministers becoming angry at this point. How can you "unbaptize" someone and to what purpose? Are you not really mocking their faiths?

Parcher: I suppose that undoctination is not popular with those who indoctrinate. However, undoctination is not about mocking religions, per se. It is about freedom from religion, shedding the symbolic dark hooded robes and accepting responsibility for one's own life, actions and future.

Robertson: So, from your experience, many people have a psychological need for this kind of ceremony to help them put their pasts behind them.

Parcher: The significance of undoctination varies by individual. Some participate simply to be part of an entertaining occasion and they do not take the event all that seriously. Others who feel that they have been persecuted by a religion in the past, such as some gays and lesbians, see the undoctination as a serious statement and even as part of their healing process.

Robertson: With all of these ceremonies, are you not really creating a new religion for people who believe they have no religion?

Parcher: That is a good question, but the answer is no. Humanist ceremonies provide a service for people who want to celebrate the important occasions in their lives without gods and supernatural ritual. As pointed out earlier, ceremonies are not religion. They were appropriated by religion a long time ago and wrapped in veils of religious dogma. Humanist ceremonies reclaim these occasions for secular people who want to celebrate them in a manner that is natural and meaningful to them.