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Humanist weddings in Canada: An examination of secular  
marriage as a post-feminist phenomenon

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For: Humanist Canada

June, 2016

### Abstract

Marriage Acts in all provincial jurisdictions recognize two types of marriages: 1) weddings solemnized by religious organizations and 2) civil ceremonies administered by appointees of the state. While humanist organizations may perform weddings under the section of the Ontario Marriage Act governing religions, this service is not available in other provinces. Despite increasing societal secularization, little research has been undertaken on the need for secular wedding couples to engage in ceremony or the means by which such needs are met. Using a jurisdictional scan, local focus groups, and a national survey, this exploratory study argues that marriage ceremonies have persisted among the non-religious due to needs to authenticate or recognize transitional changes to the self. It suggests that humanist and other secular couples have met this need in most jurisdictions through ad hoc strategies based on available local resources but that this has not translated into political action. It is suggested that Humanist Canada needs to support educational efforts promoting secular, and in particular, humanist ceremonies.

## Humanist weddings in Canada: An examination of secular marriage as a post-feminist phenomenon

Humanist Canada administers an officiant program in the province of Ontario, which is to say, it trains and licenses celebrants recognized as having rights and responsibilities similar to that of ordained clergy under the marriage act of that province. Humanist officiants are not privileged to perform legally recognized wedding ceremonies elsewhere in the country. This research was commissioned by the board of Humanist Canada to investigate the state of humanist weddings in those parts of the country not serviced by its officiant program.<sup>1</sup> Such an investigation must necessarily be grounded in the current state of marriage generally, and this paper begins with feminist assumptions about the institution of marriage, subsequent legislative change wrought as a result of those assumptions, and resultant demographic changes to participants in marriage. We then outline a participatory method used to develop both the research questions to be examined in this study and the analysis of the resultant data. This research is exploratory and the resultant discussion includes suggestions for further action.

### *Literature Review and Background*

Influenced by an ideological view that marriage was a mechanism for the oppression of women (Carbone & Brinig, 1990; Ferree, 1990; Mohr, 1984), Canadian divorce laws were liberalized in 1968 and again in 1985 with increased entitlements to property, assets, alimony and child support for women choosing divorce. Concomitant with resultant spikes in divorce rates, new laws were passed granting “common-law” co-habitation marriage status for the purposes of taxation and the equitable division of matrimonial property. While the expected increase in common-law relationships occurred, particularly among those under the age of 30, by

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a member of the board of Humanist Canada

2011 individuals age 64 were still as likely to have been legally married at least once as their peers three decades earlier. Figure 1 illustrates the delay in first marriage for both men and women in 2011 as compared to 1981.

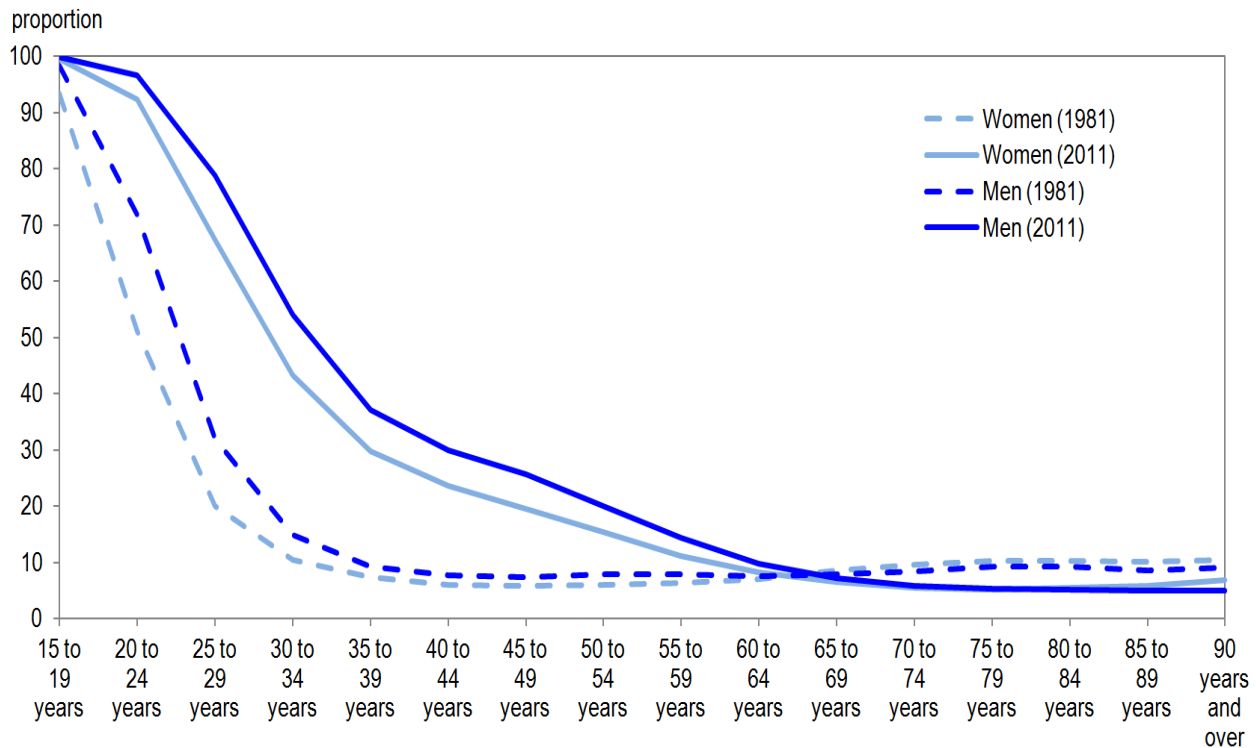


Figure 1: *The percentage of people who have never been legally married in Canada by age for 1981 and 2011*(Source: Statistics Canada, 2011)

As can be seen from Figure 1, the formal institution of marriage has persevered despite a diminution of its legal status relative to common-law unions. While the onset of first marriage has been delayed by approximately six years for both sexes, and this delay has been replaced by an increase in common-law unions particularly in the 15 to 29 age cohorts (Milan, 2013), people are still choosing legal marriage later in life. Since those declaring themselves to be of no religion increased from 12.3% in 1991 to 23.9% in 2011(*Religions in Canada - Census 2011*), the persistence of legal marriage cannot be attributed to persistent religious belief. Couples are

making this choice, neither as a rite of passage into adulthood nor as a prerequisite to cohabitation, but to satisfy a need to mark the occasion with a culturally recognized ceremony.

Since its inception in 1959 the Universal Life Church (ULC) in U.S. America has ordained more than 20 million ministers, mostly for the purpose of performing one or two weddings for friends or relatives (Hoesly, 2015). The church's only creed is that people should do what is right with "rightness" defined by the individual. In a survey of people married by the ULC (N=207), 64% self-identified as humanist, 47% as secular, 37% as agnostic, 32% as apathetic/indifferent, and 27% as atheists. Respondents were able to pick more than one self-identifying category resulting in a total of more than 100%. An important question is why people who are non-religious would want to be married ceremonially by an officiant who received their ordination through a free on-line application process that merely required that they register. After interviewing both couples and ministers Hoesly (2015) concluded:

As couples are marrying later in life, they are more secure in their worldviews and less beholden to the traditions of their parents or the religions of their childhoods. In concert, an increasing percentage of couples marrying today want a wedding ceremony that is personalized for them and reflective of their particular worldview, and they are less willing to defer to traditional religious authorities in a church wedding or to civil officials who could perform a secular ceremony in a bureaucratic office building. (p. 8)

The ULC is not authorized to solemnize weddings in Canada, but the niche it occupies is largely served by an interfaith organization called the "Clergy Support Memorial Fellowship" advertizing under the brand name "All Seasons Weddings" (McKibbon, 2016). "All Seasons" accepts clergy ordained by any organization other than ULC to perform weddings for members of all Christian sects plus Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, secular humanists, aboriginals

and followers of various “Earth religions.” According to their website, they are actively recruiting clergy to perform weddings with aforementioned non-Christian groups, and have the capacity to ordain their own. “All Seasons” claims to be an outreach ministry “for those who have no church” and are recognized to solemnize marriage in five Canadian provinces. Clearly ULC and “All Seasons” have tapped into a market, but why would people without a church want legally recognized marriages with a ceremony?

In an earlier article (Robertson, 2016), I suggested that for many couples legal marriage may act to ceremonially validate changes called “transitions” to their self and worldview. Such transitions may be re-enforced by the mutual declaration of public vows that have meaning for the couples involved. The self here is defined as culturally mediated understandings defining who we are and our place in the world (Leary & Tangney, 2003; Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Mead, 1934/2003; Robertson, 2010). Aron & Aron (2012) explained:

The inclusion-of-other-in-the-self principle emphasizes that one way in which people seek to expand the self is through close relationships because in a close relationship the other's resources, perspectives, and identities are experienced to some extent, as their own: that is, the other is to some extent "included in the self. (p. 190)

In Ontario, Canada, couples who want a secular marriage ceremony have access to humanist officiants<sup>2</sup> with status as clergy under provincial regulations. Couples in Ontario may also be married by agents of the crown called marriage commissioners or other judicial officials. In most of the rest of the country those wanting a civil ceremony must rely on marriage

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<sup>2</sup> Humanist Canada began performing marriage ceremonies in Ontario in 1996. A separate organization, the Ontario Humanist Society also began performing legal marriages with its own licensed officiants in 2009.

commissioners<sup>3</sup>. These commissioners receive no specific training in ceremony but are required to have the couples to declare they know of no reason why they cannot be lawfully wedded and that they take the other as their legal spouse. They then declare the couple legally wedded and file the requisite documentation with the provincial department of vital statistics.

Humanist Canada provided 640 secular ceremonies to Ontario couples in 2014 while having a provincial membership of less than 200. It can be seen from this that the organization was serving the needs of a constituency of couples who desired a secular ceremony but were not members. There are no studies on how couples desiring a humanist wedding ceremony in the rest of Canada achieve this. While it would be instructive to conduct research involving actual couples in pursuit of such objectives, this preliminary exploratory research focused on the experience of humanist organizations and individuals in meeting these needs. “Humanist” is defined here as an atheist having a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings exercising evidentiary based critical thinking coupled with compassion for others.

### *Method*

This research utilized a participatory action model aimed at fostering community development (Bulman & Hayes, 2011; O'Toole, Aaron, Chin, Horowitz, & Tyson, 2003; Viswanathan, et al., 2004). With this overarching methodology, researchers and communities of interest co-construct objectives and procedures creating a partnership between academics with research expertise and communities who are to benefit from the enterprise. Data is shared with

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<sup>3</sup> Nova Scotia is a province that has neither marriage commissioners nor a secular organization providing wedding ceremonies.

the communities to be studied or their representatives who are then invited to add their interpretations and perspectives.

In this case, the board of Humanist Canada (HC) was presumed to represent the community of humanists and other non-religious to be studied. The author was recruited by the president of HC and added to the board with as specific mandate to research the provision of humanist wedding ceremonies outside of Ontario. The following research questions flowed from initial discussions on the topic at the board level:

1. How do humanists meet the ceremonial needs of humanists seeking weddings in jurisdictions that lack a secular organization mandated to perform such ceremonies?
2. Are there unmet needs for ceremony in those jurisdictions?
3. Are there strategies that HC may employ in meeting the needs of the non-religious outside of Ontario for wedding ceremonies?

Since focus groups were hosted by local humanist organizations that were not necessarily affiliated with HC, those local organizations were also appraised of progress, and invited to contribute to an interpretive understanding of the results.

The HC board approved an initial background paper which was posted on its website and this paper was shared with research participants prior to their participation<sup>4</sup>. The research began with interviews of local knowledgeable individuals about relevant legal and historical conditions affecting the provision of marriages in their areas. The names of these individuals were supplied by HC or were obtained through internet searches. These individuals were then invited to organize focus groups in their local areas or refer the researcher to representatives of

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.humanistcanada.ca/images/docs/Humanist%20Love%20&%20Marriage.pdf>



organizations who could. Focus group discussions were open-ended using guide questions reproduced in Appendix A.

At the suggestion of members of the HC board, individuals who were not part of focus groups were invited to fill out a questionnaire that paralleled the focus group questions. An invitation to complete this questionnaire, reproduced in Appendix B, was sent to 772 people on the HC membership and supporters list. The HC membership at the time was 272, two thirds of which resided in the province of Ontario. The questionnaire was also posted on the HC website and the results were tabulated by *SurveyMonkey*.

### *Results*

#### *Provincial Scan of the Provision for Humanist Weddings*

*Nova Scotia* does not have provincially mandated marriage commissioners. Since this province is also without a secular organization that provides legally recognized marriage ceremonies, one could also anticipate an unmet need among the non-religious. During the course of this study, three people were identified as wanting to provide humanist officiant ceremonies in the province with two of these already licensed in the province of Ontario. It is possible for a national organization that provides wedding services in at least one other Canadian jurisdiction to be recognized to provide weddings in *Nova Scotia* providing such an organization has a local membership of at least 25 that meets regularly for the purpose of “worship.” The existence of such a local organization that might affiliate with HC has not yet been identified. An official said the province’s deputy registrar would rule on whether Humanist Canada could be considered an established religion for the purpose of sanctifying marriages but he would take into account its standing in Ontario.

*Quebec*, like Nova Scotia, is without marriage commissioners with couples relying on an assortment of judicial and civil officials to provide secular marriages. Quebec freely issues temporary licenses to persons of interest to conduct single weddings. Two members of the Quebec association are graduates of the HC officiant training program.

Using HC's experience in Ontario as a precedent, the Humanist Association of Quebec attempted to gain recognition as a quasi-religion for the purpose of performing weddings in 2011, but the application was denied on the grounds that humanism is not a religion. The Association was advised this position could be reversed if the application was supported by an evaluation from theologians connected to a recognized school of divinity. The Quebec Humanist Association has issued an appeal of this decision citing discrimination on the basis of religious belief under human rights legislation.

*Ontario*. A local metropolitan group, the Ottawa Humanist Association, obtained recognition to appoint humanist marriage officiants under provincial legislation governing clergy in 1996. Following a suggestion from the Ontario regulatory body, this authority was transferred to Humanist Association of Canada. The national organization began training officiants in 1997.

It is likely that the Ottawa humanists benefited by a precedent set in the 1980s when a U.S. based group that identifies itself as a religion for the purpose of obtaining marriage authority called the "Humanist Society of Friends" obtained the right to perform legal marriages in Ontario. The Society of Friends is now an adjunct to the American Humanist Association and no longer performs weddings in Ontario.

*Manitoba*. Aspiring marriage commissioners apply to the province's Department of Vital Statistics who allocate commissions on the basis of area quotas. Although commissioners are allowed to charge a maximum of \$75.00 (CDN) for the service of registering the marriage,

additional fees may be charged for marriage preparation and travel. Two such marriage commissioners are members of Humanist, Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba. Neither of these commissioners has taken officiant training through HC.

*Alberta.* The metropolitan centers of Calgary and Edmonton are home to several humanist and atheist groups, but none provided marriage services at the time of this study with the result that the non-religious must rely on the province's system of marriage commissioners. Marriage commissioners are allocated by the province using a quota system, and they may charge up to \$75.00 for providing a ceremony and registering the required documents. Such commissioners are required to perform all types of secular marriage including those that might not mirror humanist values. No humanist or secular organization in Alberta has applied for the right to solemnize marriages under the Alberta Marriage Act. The act has provision for the recognition of national religious organizations to solemnize marriages where that incorporated organization has been providing the service in at least one other jurisdiction for at least three years and has a minimum of 100 verifiable local members.

*British Columbia.* In British Columbia people wishing to become marriage commissioners apply to the province and, after an initial screening, are placed on a waiting list until there is a vacancy in the quota designated for their area. Any preparatory training is up to the individual commissioners, but they may not have other paid employment. Since marriage commissioners in this province are only allowed to charge \$75.00 per wedding, and since they may not charge for additional services in wedding preparation and the individualization of ceremony, this effectively restricts commissioners to those who are retired or dependent on spousal or other support.

A metropolitan Vancouver organization, the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA), applied to the province's Vital Statistics Department to solemnize marriages in 2013. Their application was denied on the grounds that their organization did not constitute a religion. According to their executive director, the organization is seeking a legal opinion with respect to appealing this decision or re-submitting an application. Interest has been expressed by members of groups in Victoria and Kamloops in pursuing the certification of humanist officiants in their cities

Similar to provisions in other provinces, a national organization that has solemnized marriages in at least one other jurisdiction for a minimum of five years may be recognized for that purpose in British Columbia providing there is an existent provincial membership of at least 100. As with other jurisdictions, British Columbia marriage regulations are couched in religious language with local organizations described as churches or congregations.

#### *Results of Focus Group Discussions*

Focus groups make use of group dynamics to gain additional understanding about a topic of interest beyond that which may be provided by interviewing techniques. They can be extremely dynamic, generating a large number of ideas, issues, topics, and even solutions to problems more effectively than individual interviews. Humanist organizations in six cities outside of Ontario were invited to participate in focus group meetings with a HC facilitator. Three responded by organizing such groups.

*Vancouver.* This focus group consisted of nine participants who were members of the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA). The group responded to a PowerPoint presentation from one of two HC facilitators.

One participant estimated the group receives about six requests for marriages annually. Group members agreed most of these requests have been referred to two marriage commissioners who are sympathetic to the need for ceremony and have taken training in ceremony in U.S. America. One of these commissioners was described as favoring “New Age” weddings. Participants agreed that it would be better to have humanist celebrants. It was suggested that couples wanting little or no ceremony would be free to utilize the provincially sanctioned commissioners. One participant opined that the development of humanist marriage celebrants or officiants in British Columbia would probably require a change of provincial legislation.

The group has been active in providing memorial services and naming ceremonies for which there is no provincial legislation. One participant suggest the group engage in an “ethnic outreach” to link with others unhappy with the restrictive nature of provincial legislation. Discussion of the differences between religious creed and humanist values ensued. It was suggested that humanist values, such as valuing gender and racial equality, can be reflected in ceremonies but should not be taken to be a religious “creed.” Training existent marriage commissioners in humanist ceremony was described as a “stop gap.” Training humanists in ceremony and having them apply to the provincial licensing authority to become commissioners was seen as cumbersome as the appointments are not automatic and are subject to provincial directives.

*Victoria.* I met with three Victoria humanists including one who would like to become an officiant / marriage commissioner and one who became a wedding planner. At issue is British Columbia’s restrictive regulations governing marriage commissioners who are allowed to charge \$75.00 and are restricted from charging for other services or from holding other paid jobs. It was

the latter consideration that led the first participant to conclude that she could not give up her career for this avocation. The second participant, who had been an ordained minister, became a marriage commissioner as a reflection of his humanism. From this experience he decided to avoid the restrictive regulations by giving up his commission and by becoming a wedding planner. He still provides ceremonies, but he brings in marriage commissioners to do the clerking functions as needed.

Participants referenced a survey of members completed the year previously that revealed humanist officiating to be a low priority. It was explained that the membership of the Victoria group is quite elderly, past the age when marriage is a usual consideration. The group expressed a consensus, however, that the need for humanist ceremony could not be met by marriage commissioners as they are currently constituted in the province. The former commissioner has also conducted funerals and memorial services.

*Winnipeg.* Five members of the Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba (HAAM) met with the writer in Winnipeg. Two of the participants were marriage commissioners licensed by the province. Unlike British Columbia and my home province of Saskatchewan, Manitoba marriage commissioners may charge for additional services required to develop unique and individualized ceremonies. Thus these marriage commissioners may administer a minimal rote ceremony at provincial rates, or they may construct an individualized service that more accurately reflects the values of the couples involved at enhanced rates. The sense of the group was that given the present circumstances governing marriage in their province, there would be no need for HAAM to seek recognition to administer marriage under the section of the provincial marriage act governing religions. Group members shared that ceremony, including those not under provincial regulation such as funerals, naming and de-conversion ceremonies were

important to their community. Three participants suggested that their group, while providing needed services, experiences isolation from humanist groups in other parts of the country providing similar services. It was suggested that a national organization could provide valuable networking and support for their local activities. The idea of webinars involving officiants and marriage commissioners from different parts of the country was floated.

*Focus groups not held.* Unsuccessful attempts were made to organize humanist focus groups on this topic in four metropolitan centers. Attempts were made to organize focus groups through two separate organizations in Calgary, Alberta. Individuals from both groups shared that the provision of humanist marriage had never been a high priority in their city. Two contacts were made with separate individuals from the same organization in Edmonton, Alberta. Both individuals expressed support for the project, but the organization in question failed to respond. Quebec humanists were contacted through a member who sits on the HC board. Although this group had previously attempted to gain the right to solemnize marriage in their province, the group felt it was not ready to answer the focus group questions circulated (Appendix A). Finally, unsuccessful attempts were made to locate a humanist group in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

### *Survey Results*

Twenty-two individuals responded to the survey questionnaire in Appendix B. Twenty-one responded through *SurveyMonkey* and one e-mailed his responses to the writer. Half of the respondents (11) were over the age of 60, 8 were in the range 40 -60, two were age 20 – 40, and one did not indicate age. Thirteen were male and seven identified as female. They hailed from the following provinces: Ontario (15), British Columbia (3), Nova Scotia (2), New Brunswick (1) and Alberta (1). Their responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Survey Responses as to whether Humanists Should Provide Individualized Wedding Ceremonies, Services to Couples Requesting No Ceremony, and Other Life Events*

	Should humanists provide individualized ceremonies?	Must those ceremonies reflect humanist values?	Should humanist officiant provide marriages without ceremony?	What other life events require humanist ceremonies?
Ontario N = 15	Yes – 14 No ans. -1	11	Yes – 5 No – 8 No ans. - 2	Funerals – 8 Naming – 4 Births – 2 Achievement - 1 Vow renewal – 2
Outside Ontario N = 7	Yes - 7	4	Yes – 5 No – 1 No ans. - 1	Funerals – 4 Rites of Passage - 1
Male N = 13	Yes - 13	9	Yes – 6 No – 4 No ans. - 3	Funerals -5 Naming – 2 Ed. Achieve – 1 Rites of passage - 1
Female N = 8	Yes - 7	6	Yes – 4 No - 4	Funerals – 6 Naming – 1 Births – 2 Vow renewal – 2 Anniversaries - 1
60 + N = 11	Yes = 9	4	Yes - 5 No – 3 No ans. - 3	Funerals – 5 Ed. Achieve – 1 Milestones - 1
Under 60 N = 10	Yes = 10	9	Yes – 5 No – 5	Funerals – 6 Naming – 2 Births – 2 Ed. Achieve – 1 Anniversaries - 1

Unexpectedly, 5 respondents (23%) indicated that they were humanist officiants. This represents a substantial proportion of the 40 HC officiants from Ontario, and largely explains the overrepresentation of that province in these results. Although its percentage (68%) is representative of the HC membership, it had been expected that by expanding the survey beyond that membership the participant demographics would more closely reflect the province's share of



the general population (38%). Apparently wedding officiants have a professional interest in surveys about weddings.

Every respondent to this survey agreed that there is a need for individualized marriage ceremonies with two thirds adding the provision that this “individualization” must reflect humanist values. Since this reflection was not invited by the survey questions added significance accrues to this result. Reflecting the consensus, one participant said “Humanist ceremonies should be tailored to individual needs and worldviews within the broad philosophical framework that humanism allows.” Another elaborated:

Humanist life ceremonies should be open to being tailored to individual needs and worldviews within the broad philosophical framework that humanism allows. However, ceremonial requests that reflect values or worldviews that directly contradict humanist principles (eg. rejection of freedom of conscience, inequality of gender or race, supernaturalism, etc) should not be accommodated.

Diversity of opinion surfaced over question #2 as to whether humanist officiants should accommodate couples who do not want a ceremony. Five respondents from outside Ontario said humanist officiants should accommodate such requests with only one opposed. The majority of the Ontario respondents (61.5%) would deny such requests. Those who would accede to such a request emphasized freedom of choice and self-determination. One respondent asked rhetorically “What is a marriage anyway?” Four individuals including two officiants said they would encourage the couple to have vows and a minimal ceremony while affirming the couples’ right to decide.

Those in the “no camp” on this issue emphasized that there were other civil authorities such as judges, mayors and marriage commissioners who could accommodate such requests. Two humanist officiants who said they would discuss with the couple the importance of ceremony and encourage them to have at least a minimal service said that as a result of this “soft” intervention they had never officiated a wedding without a ceremony. As a result of this admission their answers were scored as opposed to accommodation on this issue.

Question #3 asked respondents to outline future steps for the development of humanist officiating in their area and their role in that development. Three Ontario respondents noted the question was not applicable to their province. Two officiants said there was a need to increase the program’s visibility. Another said legislation should be changed to reduce the confusion between them and clergy. Non-officiants from Ontario cited the need to become involved, increase visibility, and establish appropriate humanist venues to hold such events.

In contrast, one respondent from outside Ontario declared his willingness to seek registration as a “quasi-church.” Another outlined a detailed plan of having invited an Ontario wedding officiant to perform a wedding ceremony in his province so as to set a precedent for the development of locally recognized humanist officiants. A third individual cited a need for pre-wedding counselling. A fourth person said that wedding ceremonies are a low priority for his group.

Twelve respondents said there was also a need for humanist funerals (Q 4). Other suggestions included celebrating rites of passage, educational achievement, anniversaries and renewal of vows. Four participants suggested that officiants do naming ceremonies while another two commended birth celebrations.

The final question (Q 5) was an open ended invitation to list issues of related import. Most participants (16) did not respond. One participant said the government should stop privileging marriage. Another called on HC to develop a strategy dealing with religious sects who call themselves “humanist.” It was suggested that part of the role of humanists was to help people establish personal values. A fourth said our mission was to convey humanism to non-humanists. A fifth wondered if HC was willing to commit itself financially to aid in the development of officiant programs outside of Ontario.

### *Discussion*

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the government Canada unwittingly engaged in a nation-wide experiment by changing the economic and structural rules governing marriage. The survey respondent who observed that the institution of marriage fails to reflect the “modern reality” was, in fact, reflecting a reasoned sentiment 40 years ago. But despite an increasingly secular population and legal recognition of common-law unions, couples continue to seek legally recognized ceremonial marriage albeit later in life as compared to previous decades. Its continuance despite reduced legal and economic imperatives to marry supports the notion that a culturally recognized ceremony represents an evolutionary or fundamental need transcendent of ideological and religious imperatives. The survey revealed that those humanists who were sufficiently interested in the topic to read a lengthy background paper and answer a related questionnaire about ceremony, were unanimously agreed that individualized marriage ceremonies should be available to the non-religious. There was also agreement that humanism represents a distinct philosophy to which people can adhere and that humanist officiants should not be compelled to conduct ceremonies that are not in accord with that philosophy.

The interprovincial scan contained in this study revealed substantial differences between marriage acts of various jurisdictions, and the focus groups reflected those differences. Manitoba marriage commissioners enjoy the flexibility to provide humanist ceremony to a degree approaching that of humanist officiants in Ontario with the important difference that they remain appointees of the crown. Manitoba humanists have identified two such commissioners in their midst who fill this need for humanist ceremony.

As the British Columbia focus groups demonstrated, local organizations within the same jurisdiction can adopt widely different strategies to cope with unsatisfactory rules and regulations. Dissatisfied with existent marriage commissioners, one metropolitan B.C. humanist group is battling solemnize marriage in its own right. In the other metropolitan center marriage commissioners are used as clerks with the actual ceremony conducted by a wedding planner.

In a reversal, where humanist officiants are asked to provide essentially a clerking function with a substantive wedding ceremony planned for elsewhere, the response in this survey was divided. Ten survey respondents said humanist officiants should be willing to accommodate such minimalist requests while nine respondents and the participants in one focus group, said such couples should be referred elsewhere. It was universally accepted that humanist officiants should refrain from ceremonies that run counter to humanist values, and some felt that at least a minimal ceremony was essential.

In answer to the first research question, humanists often meet their needs for wedding ceremony in jurisdictions that do not have humanist officiants by finding a marriage commissioner or other provincially mandated official to conduct an individualized ceremony, or by accepting the minimalist service of those officials while planning a more meaningful ceremony separately. There is a third possibility that was not within the scope of this research:

Couples could accept and attribute significance to a religious wedding while bracketing those parts of the service with which they do not agree.

The second research question dealt with the existence of unmet needs for ceremony. As we have seen with respect to weddings, this depends on jurisdiction. The need for humanist funerals was cited by survey respondents and focus groups across jurisdictions. Since officiating at funerals is not regulated, deficiencies in this area would be related to availability of officiants and public awareness of the service. HC includes funerals and naming ceremonies as part of its officiant training and this service could be extended parts of Canada outside of Ontario.

The third research question had to do with strategies HC could employ to better meet the needs of the non-religious outside of Ontario for wedding ceremonies. The picture that emerged is that non-religious couples view their marriage as a personal, as opposed to political, issue. They survey the possible resources in their communities and develop wedding plans accordingly. In one province, they seek out humanist officiants in significant numbers. In other provinces they use marriage commissioners, other provincial designates or churches. They may add their own personal but not legally recognized ceremony to the service provided or at another location. In one way or another, the psychological need for ceremony is serviced without it becoming a “hot button” issue for humanists comparable in emotive intensity to issue like dying for dignity or public funding for religious schools. At this point the provision of humanist ceremonies must be seen, not an essential service, but a value-added service dependent on marketing.

As a national organization, HC can advertise the virtues of humanist ceremony. Acting in conjunction with local groups who have an interest in pursuing such services, we can become an informational warehouse providing humanists with a range of information and strategies drawing on the experience of peers in different parts of the country.

Marriage commissioners in one focus group session suggested that they would benefit from ongoing networking and support. HC could establish a directory of marriage commissioners who are willing to provide humanist weddings. Using our experience gained in Ontario, we could offer webinars to such a contact list on topics of interest. This directory could be posted on-line.

HC approved using Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) as a means of crediting the training and experience of marriage commissioners toward certification as humanist officiants. This option has not yet been utilized for at least two reasons: 1) There is little direct benefit of becoming recognized as a humanist officiant in a province where we cannot yet solemnize marriage, and, 2) We do not yet have a contact list of marriage officiants willing to provide humanist ceremonies.

One weakness in relying on marriage commissioners is that they are under provincial appointment and direction. They are normally appointed to fill vacancies and must perform weddings within the parameters set by the appointing body. It becomes incumbent, therefore, for humanist organizations to apply for the right to solemnize marriage, and to do so we must apply under the section of the respective marriage acts governing religions. This is problematic for many humanists but not for Albert Einstein who famously said, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind (Einstein, 1993 p. 24). This statement is sometimes misinterpreted by religionists who neglect to read further on the same page:

The word god is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this.

He subsequently explained, “The scientific method itself would not have led anywhere, it would not even have been born without a passionate striving for clear understanding” (Einstein, 1993 p. 113). Einstein’s religion, therefore, includes a passion for understanding devoid of supernatural explanations. His religion also includes compassion for others, equality, humility and identification with mankind as opposed to tribal, national or ethnic groupings. Humanists use a similar definition of religion when applying under those sections governing the solemnization rights of religions.

Some might argue that the argument for a secular religion is sophistry and that religion is popularly identified with supernatural belief, and they are correct. On the other hand, sometimes legal sophistry is necessary to guarantee individual rights that have been established elsewhere. As Canadians equality rights are constitutionally enshrined; therefore, marriage acts must be interpreted as applicable to humanists. Similar reasoning was recently used by the Supreme Court to declare that Metis are Indians, but only for the purpose of establishing jurisdictional responsibility.

With its long history of providing service HC could provide affidavits and testimony in support of humanist groups seeking the rights to solemnize marriages. Alternately, jurisdictions allow for organizations that are national in scope to provide this service where they already provide marriages in at least one other jurisdiction and where they have a minimum of 25 to 100 local members (depending on the jurisdiction). Using this mechanism, HC could work cooperatively with local affiliates to apply to provincial authorities for recognition, and to train local officiants once that recognition is obtained.

If humanists are not comfortable working under current legislation governing marriage, they have the option of lobbying their legislatures for a change. For example, one officiant taking

this survey said she felt uncomfortable being referred to as “clergy” under her province’s regulations. HC may wish to approach the Ontario government with the proposal to amend their marriage act to insert the words “or other officiants” wherever the word appears in legislation. A more difficult process would be for humanists, supported by HC, to ask for a separate but parallel section of the marriage act of their province governing the right of non-religious organizations to solemnize marriage. We could begin to meet this long-term term object by encouraging the introduction of private members’ bills addressing the need in respective jurisdictions. As a national organization, HC could assist in the development of draft legislation.

Where it has been attempted, local humanist groups have experienced difficulty becoming recognized to solemnize marriages. As a national body, HC cannot proceed without the collaboration of local groups. We need each other in this enterprise.



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## Appendix A: Guide Questions for Focus Groups

### **On why the institution of marriage refuses to fade and die and what humanists should do about it**

Dear fellow humanists:

Ceremony can be an important part of our human experience. My mandate on the Humanist Canada board is to investigate and share information about how humanists address this need and to make recommendations on how Humanist Canada may support local groups. My focus is on weddings because they are regulated by governments, but ceremonies can also include funerals, naming ceremonies, de-conversion ceremonies, coming-of-age rites, and any other event that marks a transition in a person's life.

The regulations governing weddings vary by jurisdiction and humanists differ in their priorities with resulting regional and local differences. Gaining a global view is a challenge. You can assist by responding to some or all of the following questions, and by e-mailing your responses to:

[lloyd@hawkeyeassociates.ca](mailto:lloyd@hawkeyeassociates.ca).

1. The discussion paper makes a case that the marriage ceremony can be a transitional event, and that humanist officiants should construct individualized ceremonies from the values and worldviews of the participants. Do you agree with this general thrust and, if so, what limitations would you put on this thrust (i.e., are there some values or worldviews that we should refuse to reflect in ceremony)? If you disagree with the suggestion that officiants should construct individualized ceremonies, why do you disagree with this thrust?
2. There will be couples who state that ceremony is not important to them and they want the minimum required to obtain a legal marriage in their jurisdiction. In one such case I had a couple state that they wanted to sign the required documents and that they would have a "real" marriage later. How should humanist officiants approach such couples?
3. Given current legislation and resources in your area, what should be the next steps for the development of humanist officiating in your area? In what ways are you willing to contribute to this process?
4. The focus of this discussion has been on weddings. What other significant life events are there that humanists require and how are these needs being met now?
5. Are there any other questions you would like to address as part of this discussion?

Sincerely,

Lloyd Robertson, Board Member

Humanist Canada

[Insert Running title of <72 characters]

Appendix B: Cover instructions and list of internet survey questions

Dear fellow humanists:

Ceremony can be an important part of our human experience. My mandate on the Humanist Canada board is to investigate and share information about how humanists address this need and to make recommendations on how Humanist Canada may support local groups. My focus is on weddings because they are regulated by governments, but ceremonies can also include funerals, naming ceremonies, de-conversion ceremonies, coming-of-age rites, and any other event that marks a transition in a person's life.

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1. The discussion paper makes a case that the marriage ceremony can be a transitional event, and that humanist officiants should construct individualized ceremonies from the values and worldviews of the participants. Do you agree with this general thrust and, if so, what limitations would you put on this thrust (i.e., are there some values or worldviews that we should refuse to reflect in ceremony)? If you disagree with the suggestion that officiants should construct individualized ceremonies, why do you disagree with this thrust?
2. There will be couples who state that ceremony is not important to them and they want the minimum required to obtain a legal marriage in their jurisdiction. In one such case I had a couple state that they wanted to sign the required documents and that they would have a "real" marriage later. How should humanist officiants approach such couples?
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4. The focus of this discussion has been on weddings. What other significant life events are there that humanists require and how are these needs being met now?
5. Are there any other questions you would like to address as part of this discussion?

Sincerely,

Lloyd Robertson, Board Member

[Insert Running title of <72 characters]