

## 2.5 Rites of passage. Is there any point in having religious ceremonies to mark important stages of life?

### A Christian window: Roman Catholic

#### Birth: Baptism

- Parents and Godparents are asked if they are willing to teach and train the child in the Christian faith.
- The priest draws the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead with his hand.
- The parents and Godparents do the same.
- There are prayers, Bible readings and a short talk.
- The priest dabs a little oil on the baby's chest. This is a sign of the strength that God will give them in their efforts not to do wrong.
- The water in the font is blessed and the parents and Godparents have to make promises about their own faith.
- Water is poured over the baby's head three times as the priest says, "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."
- The baby is anointed again with a different oil as a sign of being chosen to serve God.
- The baby is wrapped round with a white shawl which represents a clean new life.
- One of the parents lights a candle from the large Easter candle and the priest says, "Receive the light of Christ. Walk always as a child of the light."
- There may then be prayers or a celebration of Mass.

### A Christian window: Baptist

#### Birth: Infant Dedication

- This takes place during a normal service. Friends and relatives are invited.
- The baby is carried to the front of the church.
- The minister gives thanks to God for the gift of the child.
- The minister prays for the baby and for the family.
- Sometimes, the parents and all the people are asked to stand up and say that they will help to teach the baby the Christian faith.
- Sometimes the family are given a certificate and cards; presents or a Bible may be given.

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### A Secular/Humanist window

#### Humanist Baby Namings

People who have a secular worldview do not believe God exists and so would not want any religious celebration of rites of passage. They would celebrate in many different ways. The following are some ideas suggested by the British Humanist Association.

- The ceremony could be held at the start of a special celebration party, either at home or another special venue.
- At the start of this party, the parents may declare their love for the baby and their hopes for his/her future.
- They may also state their commitment to caring for him/her in every way.
- They may have some special readings of prose or poetry.
- Instead of Godparents, they may choose relations or friends who can act as 'guide parents', 'supporting adults', 'mentors' or 'special friends'.
- They too could join in the ceremony stating their commitment to being there for the child as he/she grows up. At some stage, the name of the child may be declared.
- To mark the occasion, the parents could provide a special book for everyone present to sign with a message which the child could read in later years. A tree could be planted which would grow up as the child does.
- Brothers and sisters as well as other relations and friends could all join in this special part of the celebration.
- They may choose to have a special cake to mark the event with the child's name(s) written on it.

### A Postmodern window

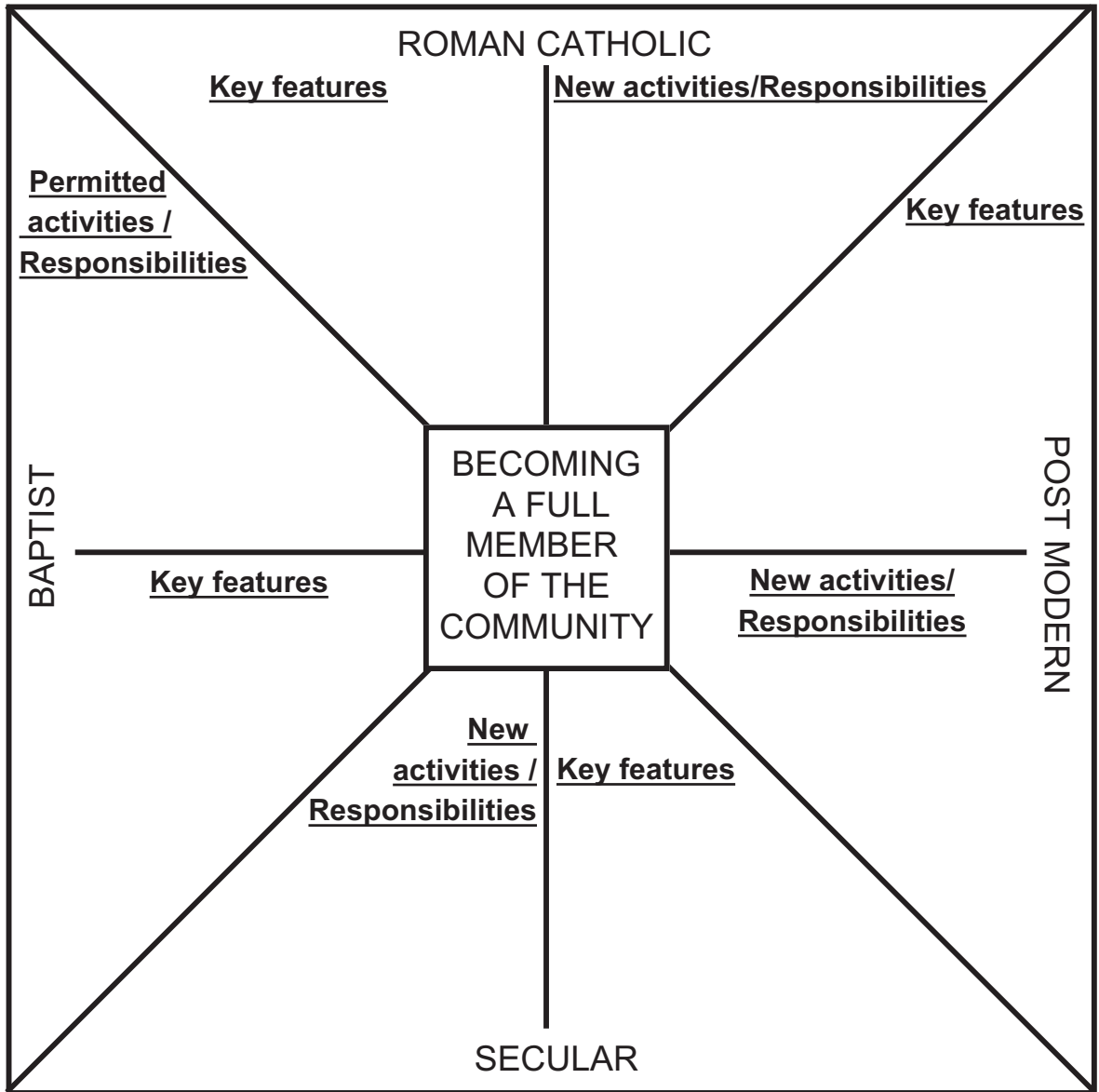
#### Birth: Naming Ceremony

There would be no typical Postmodern celebration, but the Birth celebration would probably be very similar to the secular humanist although it would contain more superstition to bring good luck and elements from different religions. For instance, they might give the baby

- a cross to wear
- an 'Om' symbol
- a copy of 'The Serenity Prayer', see [www.rethinking.co.uk](http://www.rethinking.co.uk)
- a copy of 'Footprints in the Sand' see [www.rethinking.co.uk](http://www.rethinking.co.uk)
- a copy of Desiderata 'Go placidly amongst the noise and the haste ...', see [www.rethinking.co.uk](http://www.rethinking.co.uk)
- a silver spoon
- items with the star sign which the child's birthday falls under
- a celebration cake with the child's name and the relevant zodiac sign, a horse shoe, a sprig of heather or a black cat for good luck

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**Figure 1**



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### A Christian window - Roman Catholic

#### **Becoming a full member of the community: First Communion and Confirmation**

- When the children are about 7, they are taught about the Mass by catechists (people who are especially trained to prepare the children for their First Communion and Confirmation). On the First Communion Sunday they wear their best clothes, sometimes white for the girls. It is a very special occasion and is often followed by family parties, with cards and gifts being given.
- When the children are young teenagers, they are prepared for Confirmation. They will be taught in church and at home.
- During a service of Mass, they stand and make the promises, vows, for themselves that their parents and Godparents made at their baptism.
- They go and stand in front of the Bishop with a person who will support them standing behind them.
- The Bishop lays his hands on the child's head and dips his thumb into some oil called chrism. He uses this to make the sign of the cross on the child's head. It symbolises the giving of strength and the cross stands for the Christian faith.
- The Bishop says, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit" and the child says, "Amen".
- The priest says, "Peace be with you" and the child answers, "And also with you."
- They will be given gifts, e.g. a rosary, a book of prayers for Mass

### A Christian window - Baptist

#### **Becoming a full member of the community: Believers' Baptism**

- This is for people who can personally say that they believe in Jesus Christ and want to follow him.
- He/she is interviewed by the minister and if accepted will be prepared for the ceremony.
- The baptism may take place in a special small pool in the church called a baptistry, or in a river, lake, the sea, swimming pool.
- Friends and relatives join with the other members of the church.
- A service is held with readings, prayers, a sermon – all with the theme of following Christ.
- The person being baptised may be asked to tell everyone how she/he became a Christian, or was 'converted'. This is known as a testimony.
- The minister and the person being baptised step down into the water.
- Standing in the water the minister may ask him/her, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your own personal Saviour?"
- If the person answers, "Yes" then the minister may say, "On your confession of faith, I gladly baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."
- The person is then held as they lean backwards into the water until they are completely covered. This is known as immersion.
- As he/she steps out of the water a friend/relative will welcome them and place a towel round them.
- The baptised person is usually given a certificate and cards and presents, e.g. a Bible.

Being baptised is a way for someone to say in public that their old life is over (washed away), and that they started a new life in Christ Jesus.

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### A Secular/Humanist window

#### **Secular/Humanist: Becoming a full member of the community**

Humanists believe that people should be able to think for themselves. There is no need to trust traditional authorities just because they are traditional, or gods for whom they can see no evidence. Neither do people need to look to sacred texts but should use their consciences to guide them. People should trust others who have earned their respect. The good life is based on mutual respect. People should trust themselves and others to help sort out problems as there is no god to help.

- At 18, the usual custom is for the young person to have a party or celebration with their friends. This may involve family as well, or there may be a family celebration at a different time.
- At the party there would possibly be helium balloons with '18' on them.
- Those present would give congratulation/happy birthday cards and presents. Some of these may be considered to be especially relevant to being an adult, such as a special watch or a pewter tankard.
- There may also be special speeches and a toast to the 18 year old.
- There would probably be a large birthday cake with the number 18 on it.
- From this age, the young person is considered a fully responsible member of society and is entitled to vote.
- He/she is also considered adult and independent regarding any judicial procedures.
- He/she is permitted to buy alcohol.

### A Postmodern window

#### **Postmodern: Becoming a full member of the community**

As with the birth celebrations, there would be no typical Postmodern celebration and the celebration would probably be very similar to the secular humanist.

- Elements of superstition and other religions or good luck tokens, such as horse-shoes, black cats, zodiac signs, could all be part of the celebrations/decorations and appear on cards and presents.
- Gifts of jewellery would include some of these items and symbols from different religions. For instance, crucifixes, the Om sign, the Buddhist wheel, the crescent and star, etc. They may have tattoos showing many of these as well.
- There could be a cake with 18 on it and some good luck items such as the relevant zodiac sign, a horseshoe or a black cat.