

RESOURCE 3.4

Investigating humanism: ideas for teaching and learning

Overview

This section gives some resources for students to investigate humanism, a prominent example of a non-religious worldview. The number of people who are members of humanist organisations is relatively low (Humanists UK says it has 100,000 members and supporters; 10,225 people described themselves as humanist in the 2021 Census in England and Wales). However, Humanists UK is one organisation that has a prominent voice in the media. Given the huge diversity among the non-religious, which

means that there are no major groups or institutions that represent them, Humanists UK is frequently approached to give a non-religious response when questions of religion are raised. This unit gives students an introduction to humanism as a non-religious worldview and to Humanists UK as an organisation. It also provides a case study of one humanist who is active in making a difference to the world in the one life she believes she has.

Context

This section is ideal for introducing humanists and humanism to students aged 11–14, as well as providing background information for students involved in examinations for 14–16s, so that they understand at least one example of a non-religious worldview.

Essential knowledge

Substantive knowledge

- Humanism is an example of a non-religious worldview. It has deep roots, back to the Ancient Greeks.
- While some scholars see ‘humanism’ as a legitimate strand within religions (e.g. ‘Christian humanists’, such as Erasmus) it is most frequently used to describe a non-religious worldview.
- Humanism principally describes a worldview without belief in God/gods and the supernatural; where meaning can be found in humanity and the natural world; where the best way to find out about the world is through science.
- There is no central authority within humanism nor any humanist orthodoxy that people must follow, so humanists may have a variety of beliefs and values.
- Humanists UK is a campaigning organisation that seeks, for example, to educate people in the principles of humanism, to support non-religious people especially when they face persecution, such as when leaving a religion, and to protect people’s right to freedom of speech.

Disciplinary knowledge

- Three accounts offer descriptions of humanism as a worldview, a humanist organisation, and the motivation of one humanist to make the world safer for babies and their mothers. Students can weigh up the information presented, reflecting on: the origins of the accounts; how far they cohere with other research or accounts of humanism as a non-religious worldview; and whether such coherence matters.
- Demographic and poll data are used to back up some claims. Using skills from sociology and other social sciences, students can investigate the statistics, the questions asked, and the interpretations given.

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Teaching and learning

Worldviews

1. This book uses the term ‘worldview’ as found in the RE Council’s draft resource for its worldviews project.¹ It describes a personal worldview as the ‘way in which a person encounters, interprets, understands and engages with the world’. Explore how far this is different from the description given by Luke Donnellan on p. 12: *A person’s worldview describes the way they make sense of the world and make choices about how to live. It is sometimes called an approach to life. It influences the way a person answers questions about what is real, how we should treat other people and animals, and how we can be happy.*

Non-religiousness is hugely diverse, and there is no organised non-religious worldview comparable to the Christian or Jewish tradition, for example.

This resource book generally interprets ‘non-religiousness’ as a personal worldview. This means that our personal context (our gender/sex, identity, upbringing, education, experience, hopes, beliefs etc.) affects our encounters in the world, and how we interpret and understand them.

Humanism

2. Read Luke Donnellan’s account of humanism on pp. 12–13. Support students in creating or adding to a glossary of key terms, using the explanations given in the account.
3. Using the sociological categories of ‘believing, behaving and belonging’, ask students to list evidence of what humanists believe, how they behave, and ways in which they belong. (These categories can be used to examine different kinds of religious adherence too – not all members of any specific religious tradition will believe, behave and belong in the same way.)
4. The article introduces Humanists International and the Amsterdam Declaration. Examine the Declaration with students ([humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration](https://www.humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration)), mapping evidence of where the articles in this section (pp. 12–13, 14–15 and 16–17) reflect the humanist values expressed in the Declaration.
5. With older students you might like to discuss how little space is given to the atheistic basis of humanism in the Amsterdam Declaration: ‘morality ... need[s] no source outside of humanity.’ Contrast this with the key focus often given to presentations of humanism in RE/RVE/RME, as being about people who do not believe in God. Talk about how far discussion of non-religion is

tied to discussion of religion. Is this inevitable? Is this a problem, or is it a barrier to thoughtful reflection in RE? To what extent is this to do with the dominance of Christianity in Western culture and thought?

6. The writer argues that atheism and secularism are not worldviews. This argument applies to organised or institutional worldviews, but an individual’s atheism or secularism is likely to have an impact on their personal worldview. See if students can suggest ways in which an individual’s (a) atheism and/or (b) secularist beliefs/attitudes might affect their views on, for example, religions, religious involvement in state ceremonies, religious leaders’ involvement in state parliaments, ethics and moral decision-making, authority etc.

Humanists UK

7. Use the second article from Luke Donnellan, on pp. 14–15, to explore the work of Humanists UK. Expand their glossaries, and add to their categories of what humanists believe, how they behave and how they belong.
8. Humanists UK has a speaker network: [humanists.uk/education/schoolspeakers](https://www.humanists.uk/education/schoolspeakers). Use this resource to help prepare your students to ask thoughtful questions, and invite a humanist in. Talk with students about how representative a single humanist can be, and how far that matters.

¹ REC 2022 Religion and Worldviews in the Classroom: developing a Worldviews Approach www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/projects/draft-resource/

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Angela Gorman: humanism in action

9. Angela Gorman's interview (pp. 16–17) offers another opportunity for students to amplify their glossaries on humanism, and to add to their examples of what humanists believe, how they behave and how they belong.
10. Talk about how Angela's worldview changed from a more religious one to a non-religious one. Ask students to sketch out where their own worldview journey began and where it is now. Talk about whether and why any students' worldviews have changed in similar ways.
11. Angela talks about her motivation to help mothers and babies in Africa. Ask students to list her motivations for getting involved. Explore the website www.lifeforafricanmothers.org to find more data on the dangers faced by mothers and babies, and how the charity helps.

Evaluative statements

Ask students to respond to the following statements, in the light of their learning from this section. They should try and set out a range of possible responses before indicating what their own views may be.

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'Think for yourself. Act for everyone.' How good a summary is this of humanism as you have encountered it in these pages?

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Someone may identify as non-religious in a survey, but their worldview may be influenced by religious practices or teachings from their past or their culture. How non-religious do you have to be in order to be 'non-religious'?

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Humanism as described here is really an alternative to religion.

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In an increasingly non-religious society, the rights and interests of non-religious people need to be championed.

Digging deeper

12. Angela Gorman expresses the idea that more affluent, more secular societies suffer less than poorer, more religious ones. This is a claim that is made by sociologists such as Phil Zuckerman (see his *Society without God*, NYU Press 2010). Talk about this carefully with students. Tell them to be aware that correlation does not mean causation: links between (a) wealth, secularity and more safety, and (b) poverty, religiousness and less safety do not indicate what has caused these features.
13. You might like to take this question further and explore some of the data from Pew Research on the connection between belief in God and morality in relation to economic development. See www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide
14. In his book *The Secular Paradox: on the religiosity of the non-religious* (NYU Press 2022), ethnographer Joseph Blankholm describes the secular paradox as 'the tension between what secular people do not share and what they have in common – between avoiding religion and embracing something like it'. (Blankholm is using 'secular' to mean 'non-religious', as is common in the US and in popular usage in the UK.) In what way(s) is humanism, as described in these articles, 'something like a religion'?