

Why humanists should have a role on SACREs and ASCs

Including humanism in religious education

Religious education is a space in the curriculum where young people have the opportunity to explore questions of identity, belief, values, meaning, and purpose. Today, it is essential that it includes non-religious as well as religious perspectives on the questions and themes it explores. It is therefore important that SACREs include humanist representation to support them to guarantee high-quality, inclusive RE in UK schools.

Humanists are supportive of religious education. However, they want to ensure that it is inclusive of humanism as an example of a non-religious worldview. Inclusiveness is an important principle underpinning good RE, which usually sees itself as concerned with a range of responses to ultimate questions and ethical issues, and offering pupils the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and values and to learn about those of others.

Including humanism in RE supports all the aims and outcomes of the subject. It supports the acquisition of essential knowledge about our heritage and culture, and of the modern landscape of religion and belief; it contributes to the goals of social cohesion and mutual understanding; and it helps support young people's personal development of their own worldview. Inclusive RE contributes to pupils' [spiritual, moral, social, and cultural \(SMSC\) development](#).

Humanism features in the Religious Studies GCSE specifications¹, demonstrating the need for students to receive accurate teaching about it. In previous years the absence of knowledge about humanism has led to students missing out on marks in their examinations².

As part of its [research review into religious education](#) (2021), Ofsted made it clear that the subject requires the inclusion of both religious and non-religious worldviews:

‘If pupils are to make sense of the ‘bigger picture’ of a multi-religious, multi-secular world, then they need depth of knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions.’

‘A cumulatively sufficient education in RE must include the global and the complex features of religion and non-religion...’

And that teaching about humanism should include more than simply an exploration of atheism:

¹ DfE Religious Studies GCSE Subject Content : Programme of Study: In addition, all specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the fact that:

- the religious traditions of Great Britain are, in the main, Christian
- religious traditions in Great Britain are diverse and include the following religions: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, as well as other religions and non-religious beliefs, such as atheism and humanism.

² Eduqas: 2019 Summer Examination - summary report: ‘Our Religious Studies team and Examiners felt that, following the performance in the recent assessment, candidates found the following areas particularly challenging: Candidates should avoid mis-representing the non-religious beliefs of atheists and humanists; some seemed to think that not believing in God meant they had no principles or ethical views on anything.’

‘It is important for subject leaders in primary and secondary schools to plan precise and accurate representations of religious and non-religious traditions in their curriculums. When those representations are inaccurate, pupils end up having misconceptions. For example, if subject leaders plan for pupils to learn about humanism only in relation to atheism, pupils will not gain wider knowledge of humanism as a way of life.’

Support for the inclusion of humanism within RE is widespread:

- **The Commission on RE’s [final report](#)** (2018) recommended the subject of RE be renamed Religion and Worldviews, and be reformed to ensure full inclusion of humanism.
- **The RE Council of England and Wales’ [National Curriculum Framework](#)** (2013) states that non-religious worldviews such as humanism should be included in RE.
- **Several other major reports** on RE released over the last few years have called for the subject to be more inclusive of non-religious worldviews such as humanism ([Living with Difference](#), [A New Settlement](#), and [RE for REal](#)).

Support from teachers for more inclusive religious education can also be demonstrated via the significant increase in demand for resources and requests for humanist school speakers over the past few years. The Understanding Humanism website was visited by over 50,000 users in 2020, a ten-fold increase from five years earlier.

What is humanism?

There exist both religious and non-religious worldviews. Humanism is a non-religious worldview that has developed over thousands of years, and is influenced by ideas from historical thinkers across the globe. It shares with religions an interest in the ultimate questions about the nature of reality, the basis for morality, and of meaning and purpose in life.

Roughly speaking, the word humanist has come to mean someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Who are Humanists UK?

Humanists UK is the largest humanist organisation in Britain (with over 100,000 members and supporters). It has been actively involved in supporting education about religions and non-religious worldviews for over 50 years. Humanists UK was a founding member of the Religious Education Council for England and Wales in 1973, and was involved in the development of the 2004 English *Religious education: The non-statutory national framework*, the 2010 non-statutory guidance, and the 2013 subject framework.

Humanists UK dedicates significant resources to producing classroom materials to support RE (see understandinghumanism.org.uk), providing school speakers, and training RE teachers in schools and initial teacher training institutions. Humanists UK supports humanist SACRE reps on over 120 SACREs in England and Wales.

How many humanists are there?

The 2011 Census records 25% of the UK population identifying as non-religious. However, the Census asks the weighted question, 'What is your religion?' More reliable data can be found in the annual [British Social Attitudes Survey](#). This identifies over half the population as non-religious (52% in 2018), a figure that has grown steadily over the past 40 years. The survey also records around 70% of 15-24-year-olds as having no religion. Including non-religious worldviews in the RE syllabus ensures that young people do not feel marginalised or excluded as a result of their beliefs.

The Census also offers a poor guide to how many humanists there are. There is no option to select 'humanism' on the census so the only figures recorded are for those people who ticked the 'other religion' box and then wrote in the word 'humanist'. These numbers are small. This is perhaps not surprising as, given humanism is a non-religious worldview, many humanists do not choose to select 'other religion', and Humanists UK encourages humanists to tick the 'no religion' box.

Surveys indicate that around [5% of the population self-identify as humanist](#). However, many more people hold humanist beliefs and values but do not use the label to describe themselves. Often this is because people are not aware of the label or what it means. The label 'humanist' is often employed differently to a label such as 'Christian' or 'Muslim'. Religious labels are often applied before or during the formation of associated beliefs, while many humanists discover the label later in life and realise it applies to the beliefs and values they already held. [Surveys](#) show that around one in five of the population are non-religious and hold humanist beliefs.

The above should be taken into account by SACREs when considering how many humanists there might be in their area.

Can humanists be included on SACREs and ASCs?

Page 13 of *Religious Education in English Schools* (2010) makes it clear that humanists can be **co-opted** to SACREs: 'SACREs may co-opt members who are not members of any of the four groups – such co-opted members may provide educational expertise, young peoples' views or religious and non-religious views that reflect a diverse multicultural society.'

Many SACREs, however, now include humanists within group A as **full voting members**. It is the local authority rather than the SACRE that determines whether an individual should be a full member of the SACRE or ASC.

Human rights law interprets 'religion' as inclusive of non-religious worldviews. According to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR):

'1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.³

At the domestic level, the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998 gives 'further effect to rights and freedoms guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights' and Section 3(1) states that:

'So far as it is possible to do so, primary legislation and subordinate legislation must be read and given effect in a way which is compatible with the Convention rights.'⁴

This means, when it comes to who can be included within group A, that the term 'religions' must be interpreted to include religious and non-religious worldviews such as humanism. Only if SACREs ensure that they understand the term in this way can they also ensure they meet the requirements of the HRA where the legal understanding of 'religion' encompasses both religious and non-religious beliefs.

In November 2018 the Welsh Government announced that humanists must be given the same right as religious representatives to sit on SACREs. In a letter to all local authority Directors of Education, the Welsh Government explained that its existing guidance, barring humanists from being full members of SACREs, does not 'comply with current legislation', specifically 'the Human Rights Act'. The latter change began with a legal challenge by Humanists UK to the refusal of one Welsh LA, the Vale of Glamorgan, to appoint a humanist to group A.

Education and human rights law is identical in this area in England as it is in Wales, so the legal reasoning of the Welsh Government should logically also apply to SACREs and ASCs in England. Indeed, in 2019, Humanists UK successfully challenged another LA, the Royal Borough of Greenwich, when it similarly refused to admit a humanist to group A of the local SACRE but, following the threat of legal action, backed down and acknowledged that there is a legal basis on which humanists may be included as full members (with a vote in one of the Committees, preferably Committee A).

Further support for the inclusion of humanists on SACREs followed the Commission on RE's extensive research into the status and aims of religious education. Its final report called for full inclusion of humanism on Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews (its proposed replacement for SACREs). The Commission's final report represents the views of a wide spread of the RE community and was supported by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.

Finally humanist reps *already* make a valuable contribution to over 120 SACREs in England and Wales.

³ European Convention on Human Rights (www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf)

⁴ Human Rights Act (www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/section/3)