A guide to non-religious worldviews

# Introduction

Today there is widespread recognition that young people’s education about religion and worldviews needs to be inclusive of non-religious worldviews. However, there is confusion about what it means to be non-religious, and what should and should not be included as a non-religious worldview. This guide sets out some answers to these questions.

# Legal definitions

The phrase ‘**religion or belief**’ (or ‘religion and belief’) is increasingly common in the UK, since its introduction in equalities law. Today, the Equality Act 2010 defines the terms as follows:

(1) Religion means any religion and a reference to religion includes a reference to a lack of religion.

(2) Belief means any religious or philosophical belief and a reference to belief includes a reference to a lack of belief.[[1]](#footnote-0)

‘Religion and belief’ refers to both religions and non-religious worldviews but also to ‘cogent, serious, and cohesive’ philosophical beliefs on narrower topics which relate to ‘a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour’.

More recently than ‘religion and belief’, the phrase ‘**religions and non-religious worldviews**’ has begun to emerge, sometimes condensed to ‘religions and worldviews’. This phrase is particularly common in reference to religious education (RE).

‘Religions and non-religious worldviews’ more narrowly refers to those religions and beliefs that seek to answer ultimate questions, comprehensively relating the nature of life and the universe to morality, values, and/or the way people may or should live.

# What is a worldview and what makes a worldview non-religious?

The [Commission on RE’s (CoRE) final report](https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/) defines a **worldview** as ‘a person’s way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world. It can be described as a philosophy of life or an approach to life. This includes how a person understands the nature of reality and their own place in the world. A person’s worldview is likely to influence and be influenced by their beliefs, values, behaviours, experiences, identities and commitments.’

The report also distinguishes between ‘**institutional worldviews**’, which are organised worldviews shared among particular groups and sometimes embedded in institutions, and ‘**personal worldviews**’, which are an individual’s own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews.

The report defines the types of worldviews to be studied in the subject of religion and worldviews (its proposed new name for religious education) as those that ‘make ontological and epistemological claims (claims about the nature of reality and how we know things) as well as political and moral ones.’

There are **religious worldviews** (e.g. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism) and there are **non-religious worldviews** (e.g. humanism). The definition ‘**non-religious**’ to describe a worldview can sometimes be problematic as different people may mean different things when they use the word ‘religious’. Nor are ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ the only way to divide up and categorise worldviews. However, it is important to recognise that many people do define themselves and their worldview as ‘non-religious’, and to know how they might distinguish their own worldview from religions.

One way of distinguishing non-religious from religious worldviews is to consider whether the worldview contains any belief in a life, world, or realm beyond this one, and where it locates the source of life’s meaning and values. The philosopher, Hector Hawton, argued that religions all promote some kind of a two-world theory. They hold that, beyond this material sphere, that we now inhabit, there is another place. They differ as to what is to be found in that space, but they hold that what is there is important, whether heaven or hell, gods or Nirvana, secret wisdom or celestial spirits. Secondly, all religions locate or underpin or justify at least some of their values or their claims about the meaning of human life in entities and explanations outside of humanity.

For many people, then, what makes a worldview non-religious is that it locates the causes of all events, and the sources of knowledge, meaning, and value in the natural world, with no reliance on anything beyond it.

This approach ties in with the most significant legal definition of what constitutes a religion, found in the 2014 Supreme Court case Hodkin, which established that Scientology is a religion, and therefore that the Church of Scientology can register places of worship for the purposes of marrying people. In the judgment, Lord Toulson defined, with majority agreement, religion as:

a spiritual or non-secular belief system, held by a group of adherents, which claims to explain mankind’s place in the universe and relationship with the infinite, and to teach its adherents how they are to live their lives in conformity with the spiritual understanding associated with the belief system. By spiritual or non-secular I mean a belief system which goes beyond that which can be perceived by the senses or ascertained by the application of science. I prefer not to use the word ‘supernatural’ to express this element, because it is a loaded word which can carry a variety of connotations. Such a belief system may or may not involve belief in a supreme being, but it does involve a belief that there is more to be understood about mankind’s nature and relationship to the universe than can be gained from the senses or from science. I emphasise that this is intended to be a description and not a definitive formula.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Humanists UK would, more readily than the judge, see a religion as a worldview that involves supernatural beliefs. A non-religious worldview is, analogously, a worldview that only involves naturalistic beliefs.

# What is (and isn’t) a non-religious worldview?

**Humanism is a worldview**. It makes claims about how we can answer questions about the nature of reality, suggesting this is best done through the application of science. It also makes moral claims about the need to promote wellbeing, freedom, and flourishing in the here and now, given the understanding that this is the one life we have. It is the predominant worldview of the non-religious in the UK.

**Atheism is not a worldview.** When the word ‘atheist’ is used as a description, it tells you how that person answers the question of whether or not they *believe* in a god. They don’t. It’s worth noting that atheists rarely claim complete certainty. Typically, rather than arguing that the existence of a god or gods is impossible, it is their view that it is highly improbable. They simply see no persuasive reason or evidence to believe.

The label ‘atheist’, however, tells you nothing else about that person’s worldview. It is possible for an atheist to have a humanist approach to life, and many who use the label ‘atheist’ will do so whether they use the word ‘humanist’ to describe themselves or not.[[3]](#footnote-2) However, it is also possible to be an atheist and reject the humanist approach to life. For example, one can be an egoist atheist, a postmodernist atheist, a spiritualist atheist, a nihilist atheist, or a Buddhist atheist.

**Agnosticism is not a worldview**. Agnostics claim we cannot *know* whether there is a god or not. It is possible to be both an agnostic and an atheist (and many people use both words to describe themselves): to accept that one cannot *know* for certain, but also to choose not to *believe* and live one’s life as though there were no gods. However, it is worth noting that some people also use the term ‘agnosticism’ to indicate a general attitude of indecision on matters of belief (perhaps believing in a god some of the time and not others).

Knowing someone is an agnostic, does not tell you anything else about that person’s beliefs, behaviour, or their wider worldview. Again, many agnositics will have a humanist approach to life, but some will not.

**Secularism is not a worldview.** It is often mistakenly equated with atheism or sometimes even anti-theism. However, secularism (as understood by [secularists](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/what-do-secularists-mean-by-secularism/)) is a political position or a stance on how certain features of society should be organised. Secularists typically see secularism as comprising three parts:

1. separation of religious institutions from the institutions of state, and no domination of the political sphere by religious institutions;
2. freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all, with everyone free to change their beliefs, and manifest their beliefs, within the limits of public order and the rights of others;
3. no discrimination against anyone on the grounds of their religion or non-religious worldview, with everyone receiving equal treatment on these grounds.[[4]](#footnote-3)

Again, knowing someone is a secularist tells you little about that person’s wider worldview. Most humanists will be secularists, but so will many religious people. In that sense it is not a non-religious position, but a position outside the whole religious/non-religious frame.

None of the above denies that concepts such as atheism and secularism have a place in worldviews education. It just holds that these concepts cannot be studied *as* worldviews and it’s important that in the classroom we are not presenting them as such.

There is a further complication, however. The CoRE’s report also highlights the difference between institutional and personal worldviews[[5]](#footnote-4). (Humanists will typically reject the label ‘institutional’ as humanism has no institution or structure of authority. However, it can be considered to fit the Commission's understanding of the term, being a worldview shared by many with a long history and influence on society and culture.) Individuals may sometimes describe themselves as *personally* holding an ‘atheist worldview’ or a ‘secularist worldview’. In such cases, we’d suggest teachers encourage students to investigate through wider questioning whether that individual’s worldview maps closely to any particular institutional worldviews (e.g. humanism, Buddhism), adopts elements of more than one, or is something completely different.

**Communism, nationalism, and capitalism:** Sometimes people ask whether teaching about communism, nationalism, and capitalism should be included. While it is important for young people to learn about these concepts in school, they do not fit the Commission's definition of the type of worldviews to be studied in religion and worldviews. They may make ethical and political claims about how we should live, but many people would argue that they do not make claims about the nature of reality or how we can best understand it. There is also often little call for their inclusion within the subject. In a similar way, people might flag up **vegetarianism** and **veganism** as objects of study, but it is difficult to consider these as worldviews rather than positions on particular questions, held by both some religious and some non-religious people (although perhaps for different reasons).

There are some other non-religious worldviews that could be considered worthy of inclusion: **Confucianism**, **non-religious existentialism** (note that Jean-Paul Sartre said that ‘existentialism is a humanism’), **modern Stoicism**, and **nihilism**. However there is little call for their inclusion at scale, largely due to the small number of people in the UK who hold these worldviews. It would be inappropriate for significant time to be devoted to these if that meant less time was spent learning about humanism, the UK’s predominant non-religious worldview, than was spent on the major non-Christian religions.

# Identifying as non-religious but holding religious beliefs

Sometimes the call to include wider exploration of non-religious worldviews beyond humanism appears to be motivated by the desire to highlight those people who identify as ‘non-religious’ but actually hold religious, supernatural, or spiritual beliefs (sometimes described as **‘spiritual but non-religious**’). The numbers are not insignificant, but nor are the number of self-identified Christians who do not believe in a god, an afterlife, or the resurrection (these Christians might have a sense of religious belonging, but not hold the associated beliefs or carry out the associated behaviours). It’s important for students to learn about the diversity of belief behind the labels people choose, but they must be made aware of that diversity across the board.

However, if space in the worldviews classroom to learn about the non-religious is taken up by further exploration of religious and spiritual beliefs, then that becomes problematic. It can be interpreted as an attempt to dilute teaching about humanism and the non-religious under the guise of inclusivity. While students should learn that there are people who describe themselves as non-religious but hold religious beliefs, it is difficult to argue that these people hold ‘non-religious’ worldviews. What is important is to ensure that as well as learning about those approaches to life that contain religious, spiritual, and transcendental beliefs, students also get the chance to learn about those who hold a naturalistic worldview –- who locate the sources of meaning and value in humanity and the natural world, and rely on the resources of the natural world (not anything beyond it) to answer life’s big questions. This is an important distinction for students to learn about, and could be lost if time to learn about the non-religious is overly focussed on those who identify as such but who hold religious beliefs.

# Data on the non-religious, atheists, and humanists

## How many non-religious people are there?

According to the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) over half the population of the UK are non-religious (52% in 2018)[[6]](#footnote-5). This figure has grown steadily over the past 40 years.

The BSAS also reveals significant diversity between age groups, with a greater proportion of young people describing themselves as non-religious (72% of those aged 15-25 years). This might lead some people to the conclusion that people become more religious as they get older, but other research does not appear to show that. For every person brought up in a non-religious household who becomes religious, 19 people travel in the opposite direction[[7]](#footnote-6). Each generation is becoming less religious than the one before.

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## How many humanists are there?

Around 5% of the UK population self-identify as humanist[[8]](#footnote-7). However, many more hold humanist beliefs when asked whether they believe in a god, how they make ethical decisions, and whether they look to science or religion to understand the universe around them (surveys show this could be around a fifth to a quarter of the population)[[9]](#footnote-8).

‘Around a quarter of the UK population have a worldview that is mainly humanist, and… humanism likely plays a role in the beliefs and outlooks of others too.’

Dr Lois Lee, University of Kent, Understanding Unbelief programme

Many of those who hold humanist beliefs and values don’t use the word ‘humanist’ to describe themselves because they are unaware of the label or what it means (many call themselves ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’, or ‘non-religious’). When the meaning of the label is described to them, many, but not all (surveys would indicate around three quarters of them), are happy to apply the label to themselves.

## How many atheists and agnostics are there?

The 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey[[10]](#footnote-9) revealed that 45% of the population of Britain are atheist or agnostic. Over 70% of those who describe themselves as ‘non-religious’ are atheist or agnostic. However, so are 10-20% of those who identify as ‘religious’ (e.g. Jewish or Christian). These people may feel a sense of belonging to a religion for family or cultural reasons, they may follow religious practices and celebrate religious festivals, but they do not believe in a god.

‘I am an atheist, and this confuses some people… For me, Jewishness, and I would say for an awful lot of Jews, is nothing to do with believing in God… For me, Jew is an identity. It's an ethnic and cultural identity, which I feel very strongly… My Jewish identity is to do with food, and comedy, and family, and literature, and a way of being, and, incredibly importantly, anti-semitism.’

David Baddiel, patron of Humanists UK

‘My robust agnosticism is informed by my socially liberal Hindu parents… I consider myself a non-practicing Hindu… I consider myself a Hindu, by identity rather than belief system.’

Paul Sinha, patron of Humanists UK

# Where might we go wrong in teaching about the non-religious?

If we take humanism as an example, we need to support students’ understanding of what humanists typically do believe in and stand for (freedom, reason, empathy, human rights, making the most of the one life we have), not just the things they do not (a god, an afterlife, an external ‘ultimate’ meaning and purpose to the universe).

Sometimes teachers can be guilty of stating ‘I already teach about non-religious worldviews’, when what they mean is they have included teaching about some of the reasons people might not believe in a god. For many people, atheism is just one small part of their non-religious approach to life. For many humanists, their atheism is of little relevance to their daily lives. It is important to teach about atheism and why people might be atheist, but it is critical that we avoid making it the main focus of teaching about what it means to be non-religious. If we do, then we are spending time exploring debates around religious phenomena when we could be studying non-religious approaches to life. There is also a danger that if humanism is not explored more fully, then students might develop the mistaken impression that it is defined in opposition to religion and that individual humanists spend more of their time focussed on what they don’t believe in than what they do.

The aim, then, should be to avoid the often restrictive religious lens through which non-religious worldviews have traditionally been explored. We can then move away from questions that are perhaps of particular concern to the religious and instead focus more on the ways non-religious people make sense of themselves and the world.

# Summary

If education about religion and worldviews is to be truly inclusive of the non-religious, then:

1. It is important that time assigned to learning about the non-religious is not dominated by a focus on those people who describe themselves as non-religious but who hold religious or spiritual beliefs – time needs to be spent on the study of those non-religious people with with a naturalistic approach to life;
2. Time should be devoted to the study of the things non-religious people do believe in and how they live, not just the things they do not believe in;
3. If students have the opportunity to learn about specific religions, they should also have the opportunity to learn about an example of a non-religious worldview in a comparable way – that should be the predominant non-religious worldview in the UK today: humanism.

1. Equality Act 2010, section 10: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/10>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. R (on the application of Hodkin and another) v Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages [2013] UKSC 77: <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2013-0030-judgment.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. YouGov (2017) ‘New poll shows one in five are humanists’ in <https://humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Copson, Andrew, *Secularism: Politics, Religion, and Freedom* (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Commission (2018) p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. British Social Attitudes Survey, NatCen (2018): [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1\_bsa36\_religion.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. The no-religion population of Britain, St Mary’s University (2017): [www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. YouGov (2017): [humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs](https://humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. YouGov (2017) ‘New poll shows one in five are humanists’ in <https://humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. British Social Attitudes Survey, NatCen (2018): [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1\_bsa36\_religion.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39293/1_bsa36_religion.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)