

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 100,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

INTRODUCTION

Employing language inclusive of the non-religious is far from symbolic. Instead, it enhances communication by helping you reach more people and achieve your aims. If the aim is to foster social cohesion and mutual understanding, then it helps make sure the largest group of the UK population are part of that, giving a massive boost. If the aim is to prevent persecution, then it makes sure the most viciously persecuted group worldwide are considered. And worse than that, when language is not inclusive due to an oversight, this emboldens others to take deliberately exclusive approaches, often harming social cohesion or even leading to persecution.

We know that many organisations and media outlets use inclusive language. Others want to but don't know how. That's why we have prepared this guide. You can prioritise the phrase 'religion or belief' which encompasses everyone and follows existing legal terminology. See the below glossary and guide we have prepared to highlight some issues with exclusive language and other examples that can be used that include everyone, regardless of religion or belief.

GLOSSARY

Worldview: A collective belief that attains a sufficient level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance and that relates the nature of life and the world to morality, values and/or the way its believers should live. Religions are worldviews that postulate the existence of divine, supernatural, or transcendental beings or forces, or at least partly locate their source of values and meaning outside of nature. Non-religious worldviews involve only naturalistic beliefs and offer natural origins of meaning and value.

Humanist: The only prominent non-religious worldview in the UK today, and the belief system of most non-religious people. 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;



- o 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.

Atheist: Refers to someone who does not believe in the existence of a god or gods. Not a worldview. Sometimes (e.g. in the media) used in ways that imply that other beliefs – beliefs that are more properly described as humanist – flow from it. This reflects the fact that most atheists in this country are humanists and a common assumption is that an atheist will therefore hold a variety of other beliefs which resemble humanism. But this is not necessarily so, and there is no definition of atheism that takes it to mean something more like humanism; this usage is therefore inaccurate and can lead to confusion. It is akin to referring to someone as a ‘theist’ when they could more clearly be referred to as a ‘Christian’.

Agnostic: Someone who is not sure about the existence of a god or gods, or perhaps more broadly someone who does not profess total certainty about the existence of gods or goddesses.

Secularist: Someone who believes that religion and the state should be kept separate and that there should be equal treatment for those of all religions and worldviews before the law. It is not a worldview, but a political position akin to (for example) socialism or libertarianism or feminism. Despite a common misconception, secularists can be religious or non-religious.

TERMS TO USE/AVOID

Term to avoid	Reason	What to use instead
‘Religion/s/ous’ / ‘faith/s’ when you mean to include the non-religious	Non-religious people don’t have a religion or faith	‘Religions and worldviews’ / ‘Religious and non-religious’ / ‘Religions and beliefs’
‘All religions and none’ / ‘all faiths and none’ / ‘Faith and non-faith’	Better to focus on positive beliefs of the non-religious	‘All religions and beliefs’ / ‘Religious and belief’
‘Interfaith’	Excludes the non-religious	Generally speaking ‘interfaith and belief’
‘Secular humanist’	Not a generally used/understood term in British English – best to just say ‘humanist’, which means the same thing	‘Humanist’
‘Chaplains’ / ‘Chaplaincy’	Contains religious connotations that act as a barrier to non-religious people seeking help	‘Chaplains and pastoral carers’ / ‘Chaplaincy and pastoral care’
‘Atheist’ when you mean more than just a lack of belief in a god or gods	Better to use a more precise description if this is what is meant	Usually ‘humanist’ is what is meant, or sometimes ‘non-religious’ is best
Using ‘secular’ to mean	‘Secular’ means neither religious nor	Generally speaking ‘non-religious’



non-religious	non-religious	or 'humanist' is best
'Unbelief' / 'non-belief'	These are intrinsically negative terms implying a lack of any beliefs at all	Generally speaking 'non-religious' or 'humanist' is best
'Militant secularist'	Insulting and often confused understanding of the definition of secularism	'Secularist', 'non-religious', or 'humanist', depending upon what is most appropriate
'Freedom of religion' / 'religious freedom' / 'freedom of religious belief'	Not inclusive of the non-religious	'Freedom of religion or belief'
'Freedom of religion or belief or no belief'	Implies non-religious aren't covered by 'or belief'	'Freedom of religion or belief'

WHY INCLUDE THE NON-RELIGIOUS?

In many areas of public life, it makes sense to involve the religious and non-religious equally. We believe we should view people first as human beings, with religion or belief just one element of personal identity. By working together with people in all their diversity, we can build bridges and break down barriers between communities. Excluding the non-religious from areas like RE, broadcasting, healthcare provision, dialogue work, or preventing persecution abroad would be discriminatory and would not support the social cohesion aims such projects wish to see. This is all the more true now that over half of British adults belong to no religion.

We encourage dialogue with our religious counterparts to build common ground, and where it makes sense, engage in shared action. Many aspects of our work involve engagement with people from religious backgrounds, for example, through the Network for Pastoral, Spiritual, and Religious Care in Health, the Accord Coalition for Inclusive Education, the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum, and the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.

Furthermore, case law has established that religious and non-religious beliefs should be awarded 'equal respect' and 'equal treatment' before the law (e.g. *R (Fox) v Secretary of State for Education*).¹ Therefore humanists should not be treated separately from religious people, unless there are clear and compelling reasons to do so. There have been numerous positive developments in this regard, including in 2020 when the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government renamed its 'Faith Team' to the 'Faith and Belief Team' in order to be inclusive of the non-religious, and

¹ The case concerned the state's duties in respect of religious education but the principles apply more broadly. In that case the judge found 'the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs; it is not entitled to discriminate between religions and beliefs on a qualitative basis; its duties must be performed from a standpoint of neutrality and impartiality as regards the quality and validity of parents' convictions.' *R (Fox) v Secretary of State for Education [2015] EWHC 3404 (Admin)* at paragraph 39: <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/r-fox-v-ssfe.pdf>



appointed a dedicated civil servant to that team for humanists, alongside other civil servants for the major world religions.

HOW MANY HUMANISTS ARE THERE IN THE UK?

Humanism is different from the major religions in being a descriptive label for a set of beliefs that have existed throughout history and across the world. Often when people come to self-identify as a humanist they say they have 'discovered' a term that has long applied to them. This doesn't happen with religions but is more akin to the term 'homo sapiens', for example.

A 2019 Humanists UK-commissioned YouGov poll of British adults found that around **7% of the population primarily uses the term 'humanist' to describe their non-religious beliefs**. But around **29% of the population has a non-religious outlook on life that matches the humanist one** and furthermore, **17% of respondents self-define as humanist when this fact is pointed out to them**. In other words, humanism is the explicit worldview of a plurality of non-religious people in Britain, and the implicit worldview of most. The British Social Attitudes survey records that the majority (53%) of adults say they belong to no religion. This trend is rapidly increasing, having risen from 43% over the last decade.²

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² Humanists UK. 'Latest British Social Attitudes survey shows huge generational surge in the non-religious'. 2021. Available at: <https://humanism.org.uk/2021/04/01/latest-british-social-attitudes-survey-shows-huge-generational-surge-in-the-non-religious/>

