

British Humanist Association position paper: Beliefs, non-religious worldviews, and Humanism: what we understand by these terms

In a variety of different contexts, the phrases ‘religion or belief’, ‘religion and belief’, ‘religions and non-religious worldviews’, and ‘religions and Humanism’ appear. In the following we set out what we understand by each of these terms, and how they relate together.

In summary:

- ‘Religion or belief’ or ‘religion and belief’ are phrases that now appear in UK legislation. They refer to both religions and non-religious worldviews but also to ‘coherent, serious, and cohesive’ philosophical beliefs on narrower topics which relate to ‘a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour’.
- ‘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 world to morality, values, and/or the way people may or should live.
- Humanism is the only prominent non-religious worldview that is common in the UK today. In many contexts, references to ‘religions and non-religious worldviews’, when intending to only include the major world religions, should therefore in practice be understood to mean the major world religions and Humanism.

‘Religion or belief’ (or ‘Religion and belief’)

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

Legally, ‘belief’, therefore, refers to particular religious beliefs (e.g., aspects of doctrine) as well as to non-religious ‘philosophical beliefs’. However, in common parlance in the equality, human rights, public, and third sectors, ‘belief’ is generally taken to refer to non-religious but not religious beliefs.

The reference to *philosophical* beliefs is important, as it is not just any belief in the everyday sense that constitutes a ‘belief’ for the purposes of equalities legislation, or in the common parlance of ‘religion or belief’. Case law has defined such beliefs as follows:

- (i) *The belief must be genuinely held.*
- (ii) *It must be a belief and not... an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available.*
- (iii) *It must be a belief as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour.*
- (iv) *It must attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance.*
- (v) *It must be worthy of respect in a democratic society, be not incompatible with human dignity and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others.*²

¹ Equality Act 2010, section 10: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/10>.

² Grainger plc and Ors v Nicholson UKEAT/0219/09, paragraph 24: http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKCAT/2009/0219_09_0311.html. Most aspects of this definition are founded on the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. However, this isn’t the only definition of ‘belief’ in law. The Communications Act 2003, for example, refers to ‘religion and other beliefs’, and says that “‘belief”

‘Religions and non-religious worldviews’

More recently than ‘religion and belief’, the phrase ‘religions and non-religious worldviews’ has begun to emerge, sometimes condensed to ‘religions and worldviews’, for example in the 2013 *Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England*.³ Although there is no formal definition in any authoritative source, it is plain that its intended meaning is akin to the earlier term *lifefstance*, which was coined by the humanist and philosopher Harry Stopes-Roe as meaning:

The style and content of an individual’s or a community’s relationship with that which is of ultimate importance; the presuppositions and commitments of this, and the consequences for living which flow from it. (Each individual or community hopes that it has come to a good and well-founded relationship, but the word is usually used without implying that this really is so).⁴

More succinctly, in 2007 the BHA defined ‘religion or belief’ as follows, in a way that we might rather understand as defining ‘religions and non-religious worldviews’ today:

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.⁵

Of course, non-religious worldviews are not religions, so what is distinct about religion? The most significant legal definition of what constitutes a religion can be found in the 2013 Supreme Court case that 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

means a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles or of mystical or transcendental doctrine’. Communications Act 2003, section 264:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/section/264>. Similarly, the Same-Sex Marriage Act says “‘belief organisation” means an organisation whose principal or sole purpose is the advancement of a system of non-religious beliefs which relate to morality or ethics.’ Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, section 14: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/30/section/14/enacted>. As we shall see, these are both more akin to what is more commonly defined as a ‘worldview’, on which see below.

³ This document explains, ‘The phrase “religions and worldviews” is used in this document to refer to Christianity, other principal religions represented in Britain, smaller religious communities and non-religious worldviews such as Humanism. The phrase is meant to be inclusive, and its precise meaning depends on the context in which it occurs, eg in terms of belief, practice or identity.’ Religious Education Council, *Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England*, October 2013:

http://resubjectreview.reconcil.org.uk/media/file/RE_Review_Summary.pdf

⁴ Harry Stopes-Roe, ‘Humanism as a life stance’, *New Humanist*, Vol. 103, (2), October 1988, pp. 19–21.

⁵ *Religion and Non-Religious Beliefs in Charity Law*, British Humanist Association, August 2007:

<https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BHA-Memorandum-on-public-benefit.pdf>

from the senses or from science. I emphasise that this is intended to be a description and not a definitive formula.⁶

We 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.

Humanism as the exemplar non-religious worldview

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.⁷

Thus Humanism is plainly a ‘belief’ in the legal sense of the word defined above. It is also a non-religious worldview. It is the worldview held by most non-religious people in the UK today. As we have explained, for example in a recent consultation response:

An internal opinion poll commissioned by the BHA in 2014, carried out by YouGov, found that 46% of British adults say they do not belong to any religion, and 6% identify ‘humanist’ as the word that best describes them (the other options presented to the remaining 40% being atheist, agnostic, spiritual, naturalist, none of these, and don’t know). Some of those who chose other options would likely also subscribe to the label ‘humanist’, but even setting that aside, the results suggest that around 6% of British adults primarily identify as a humanist.

With that said, 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 sexual orientation, for example. To try to get closer to understanding this phenomenon, a 2016 BHA-commissioned YouGov poll asked British adults a series of questions about their beliefs about religion, ethics, morality, and reason. The results found that 22% of the population has a non-religious outlook on life that matches the humanist one, and 17% would self-define as humanist when this fact was pointed out to them.⁸ Whatever figures one uses – 46%, 22%, 17%, or 6% – non-religious people certainly outnumber all minority religious people put together and there are more adults who are humanists than there are Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, or Buddhists.⁹

⁶ 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>

⁷ As per the page on Humanism on the BHA website: <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/>

⁸ YouGov poll on Humanism, conducted 28-29 July 2016:

<https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Results-for-BHA-Humanism-313-18.04.17.xlsx>

⁹ BHA submission to the Commission on Religious Education, British Humanist Association, February 2017:

<https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017-01-11-FINAL-BHA-submission-to-the-Commission-on-Religious-Education.pdf>

Our consultation response continues:

[Humanism] is the (explicit or implicit) worldview of the majority of non-religious people in England. Not every person who meets the definition of a humanist would refer to themselves as such and some will even be unfamiliar with the term. This reflects the fact that non-religious people are not compelled by their beliefs to engage in any sort of formal practice or observance, join any organisation, or even identify with any particular creed at all. The difference between religions and non-religious worldviews on this score should not mask the fact that the humanist outlook on life is widespread in Britain today, much more so than all the minority religions combined.

Furthermore, there is no other obvious worldview that is prominent in the UK today that is well articulated and supported by a significant body of writing. It is our view that in many contexts, references to ‘religions and non-religious worldviews’, when intending to only include the major world religions, in practice should be understood to mean the major world religions and Humanism.

The glossary of other terms which follows should make it clear why this is the case.

Glossary of other terms

It is worth considering and defining a variety of different terms to see where they fit in with the terms ‘belief’ and ‘non-religious worldview’, as we have set them out above, and how they are distinct from Humanism, also defined above.

Atheism: ‘Atheist’ refers to someone who does not believe in the existence of a god or gods. Like the opposite term ‘theist’, it constitutes a ‘belief’, under equalities legislation, but not a worldview, as it does not seek to answer wider questions relating the nature of life and the world to morality, values, and/or the way people should live.

Sometimes in the media the term ‘atheist’ is used in ways that imply that other beliefs – beliefs that are more properly described as humanist – flow from it. This reflects the fact that polling shows most self-identified atheists in this country are humanists and the default assumption is that an atheist will therefore hold a variety of other beliefs which resemble Humanism. However, this is not necessarily so – someone can be an atheist whilst also practicing a religion. There are varieties of Buddhism that are atheistic but not humanist. Nihilism and (the philosophical aspects of) Marxism are also atheistic but not humanist. There is no formal definition of atheism that takes it to mean something more like Humanism; this usage is inaccurate and unhelpful.

Atheism is not the non-religious equivalent to a religion. Neither is agnosticism, which we turn to next. Instead, they are non-religious entries in the same category as *theism*.

Agnosticism: ‘Agnostic’ originally meant someone who does not believe that it is possible to know whether gods exist or not. Today it commonly refers to someone who is not sure about the existence of a god or gods, but more broadly may encompass anyone who does not profess total certainty about the existence of gods or goddesses. Like ‘atheist’, agnosticism is a ‘belief’ in the legal sense, but not a ‘worldview’ in the sense we have discussed. Also like atheism, polling shows most self-identified agnostics in this country tend in practice to also be humanists.

Non-religious: A catch-all term for all views and individuals that are not religious. In the UK, about half of such individuals are humanists in their outlook. (A small majority of people in the UK identify as non-religious.)

Secularism: ‘Secularist’ refers to 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 beliefs before the law. It is not a worldview, but a political position akin to (for example) socialism or libertarianism. It might perhaps constitute a belief, under equalities legislation, but this is untested.¹⁰

Non-theistic religions: Some religions do not entail theism, for example Jainism or Taoism. But they are not non-religious beliefs, nor non-religious worldviews, because they still have beliefs not based on naturalism.

Other non-religious worldviews: Nihilism and (the philosophical aspects of) Marxism are examples of both non-religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews. However, none are particularly commonly held in the UK today, being in an analogous position to relatively small religions such as Jainism.

Other non-religious beliefs: Using the legal test set out on page one, employment tribunal case law has treated a variety of other beliefs as ‘philosophical beliefs’ within the meaning of the law. For example:

- *belief in ‘democratic socialism’* (Olivier v Department of Work and Pensions)
- *a belief in the sanctity of life extending to a fervent anti-fox hunting and hare-coursing belief* (Hashman v Milton Park (Dorset) Ltd t/a Orchard Park);
- *a belief that public service broadcasting has the ‘higher purpose of promoting cultural interchange and social cohesion’* (Maistry v BBC);
- *a belief that ‘it is wrong to lie under any circumstances’* (Hawkins v Universal Utilities Ltd t/a Unicom).

However, not every belief has been found by the tribunals to be a protected philosophical or religious belief. Beliefs that have been found not to be protected under equality legislation (at least in the individual circumstances of the cases in question) include the following:

- *a belief that people should pay their respects by wearing a poppy from 2 November to Remembrance Day* (Lisk v Shield Guardian Co Ltd and others) [The belief was found to lack the characteristics of cogency, cohesion, and importance and could not fairly be described as relating to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour];

¹⁰ The term ‘secular’ is slightly more complicated in how it is understood. On our website we say:

The term ‘secular’ is occasionally used to mean something that is atheistic or agnostic, and more frequently is used analogously to ‘secularist’, but the most common meaning is something that is simply not connected with religion or belief – for example, the Natural History Museum is a secular institution in this sense. When we say something is ‘secular’ this is what we mean, as we think using it in this way is the clearest.

‘Secularisation’ is the process by which something, in particular society, becomes more secular (which might also mean it is becoming less religious but does not have to), while ‘secularity’ is the state of being secular.

‘What we mean by “secularism”’, BHA: <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/secularism/>

- *a belief that the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks were 'false flag' operations perpetrated by the US and UK governments, and that the media is controlled by a global elite seeking to further a 'new world order' (Farrell v South Yorkshire Police Authority) [The Tribunal found that the beliefs 'completely failed to meet even a bare minimum standard of coherence and cohesion']; and*
- *'extreme' Marxist/Trotskyist beliefs (Kelly and others v Unison) [The views were found by the Tribunal not to be 'worthy of respect in a democratic society', partly because they would involve unlawful industrial action and seeking undemocratic revolution].¹¹*

(It should be noted that most of these decisions were made at employment tribunals and so do not establish binding legal precedents.)

Added to this, we would speculate that vegetarianism, veganism, and beliefs related to the environment almost certainly also constitute non-religious beliefs under equalities law. But all of these beliefs fall short of constituting non-religious worldviews insofar as they do not seek to answer ultimate questions relating the nature of life and the world to morality, values and/or the way people should live.

'Spiritual but not religious' and 'fuzzy religious' beliefs: Many people in the UK say they believe in some non-metaphorical higher power or life force in ways they cannot define, or believe in life after death but in no wider organised religion or theistic system. These beliefs are often termed 'spiritual but not religious'. From a legal point of view, as we have seen, such beliefs are classified as religious in nature, and indeed given their supernatural nature we would regard them as such.

Similarly, many individuals who, for example, tick 'Christian' in the Census are also in fact only vaguely religious, not holding to any of the central tenets of Christianity but loosely identifying with it as a religion on some ethno-cultural level. And there are also so-called 'cultural Jews' who may practise Judaism but not believe in its religious tenets and so could be described as atheists.

Both types of sets of beliefs constitute worldviews and, we would argue, *religious* worldviews. But, without wishing to make a commentary on the legitimacy of such beliefs, we would observe the following: unlike the major world religions and Humanism, such beliefs are rarely or never articulated in a way susceptible to study, except in the external observations of sociologists of belief. Therefore, where an argument is being made for studying the major world religions in, for example, the school curriculum, or for the major world religions to be included in public sector broadcasting, it logically follows that Humanism should also be included, and would be inconsistent not to do so. But it does not automatically follow that such 'fuzzy' beliefs should be included too.

About the British Humanist Association

The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, support and represent the non-religious, and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Founded in 1896, we have around 55,000 members and supporters, and over 70 local and special interest affiliates.

¹¹ Italicised portions quoted from Graham Richardson, 'Religion or belief discrimination: key case law', Local Government Lawyer, March 2014:
http://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=17597:religion-or-belief-discrimination-key-case-law&catid=49:comment-a-analysis-articles

For more details, information and evidence, contact **Richy Thompson, Director of Public Affairs and Policy**, on 0781 558 636 / 020 7324 3072 or at richy@humanism.org.uk.

www.humanism.org.uk

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