

## Teaching Humanism

### Definition

There is no definitive statement about what it means to be a Humanist. If you ask Google to define it, you get:

“**Humanism** is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition.”

The British Humanist Association (BHA) website says that humanists:

- Think for themselves about what is right and wrong, based on **reason and respect for others**.
- Find **meaning, beauty, and joy in the one life we have**, without the need for an afterlife.
- Look to **science instead of religion** as the best way to discover and understand the world.
- Believe people can use empathy and compassion to **make the world a better place for everyone**.

This is a good start. But...there are people who will self-identify as Jewish humanists, or Hindu humanists. Not all scientists are atheist, and not all atheists, if asked, would identify as humanist. So, as teachers of RE, what do you need to know?

### Definition for the purposes of RE

For the purposes of RE—and particularly for teaching RE in Ealing—we make reference to humanists and humanism in the curriculum as part of the move to create a totally inclusive RE experience. In other words, we teach about humanism so that students from non-religious families, or students from religious families who are exploring their own definitions of spirituality, feel that there is a place for them in the RE discussion that doesn't just focus on critique of religious beliefs. Instead, it allows students who wouldn't identify as 'religious' to offer their experiences/understanding of a meaningful life for discussion in the same venue as, e.g. a Hindu child can compare their experience to their Christian or Muslim classmates.

However it is also important to understand that any human-centred philosophy, belief, or orientation can be described as 'humanist'.

Another thing to note is that it isn't just a question of 'thinking' about right and wrong. Humanists (and, it's fair to say, many 'religious' people) will also base their ethics on what 'feels' right. The main emphasis when discussing humanist ethics should be on the **lack of an authority beyond one's own conscience**, which is something that develops through life experience and empirical understanding. In other words there is no outside authority or sacred text to definitively tell a humanist what is right and what is wrong, or even what it means to be a humanist. Humanists do however agree on many social and life issues and these ideas are often reflected in the views of the BHA and National Secular Society. (See <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/how-humanist-are-you/> for a quick quiz to find out how 'humanist' you are.)

### ☞ Asking the good question

For humanists there is no institutional authority. People or institutions must earn respect by virtue of their actions and their positions. Everything is open to question. The development of critical thinking is very important to humanists, and part of that is learning to ask the good question: that includes learning to accept that there are questions for which there are currently no easy or definitive answers.

Humanists believe that it is important to listen to a wide range of views and opinions that can be found in many sources such as world literature, philosophical and political debate and even religious texts. They look for wisdom and inspiration everywhere – no one source dominates and few are rejected

### ☞ Humanism in the community

A good introduction to expressions of humanism in community could be looking at videos of humanist naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals (examples of all can be found on YouTube). This is one way of finding common ground, i.e. these types of ceremonies link individuals with the community, as well as marking important life transitions. It is also useful to spotlight common human experiences and predicaments that require compassionate support. One way of doing this would be to talk about the recent rise in humanist chaplains<sup>1</sup> and other community support volunteers, who are trained to provide pastoral care in prisons, hospitals and the armed services.

Humanists are as charitable as any other individuals and will be moved by their ideals and their sense of what is important to contribute to society in some way. As humanists define themselves less by their philosophy than religious people do by their faith they are more likely to contribute to charities and events that are secular by nature (e.g. NSPCC). An example of a specifically humanist endeavour is the schools project in Uganda.<sup>2</sup> *Foundation Beyond Belief*<sup>3</sup> is a non-theistic charity which launched in January 2010; each quarter it spotlights five charitable organizations and members can choose which of the featured causes to support.

### ☞ The inner life

The inner life is not the sole province of religion, and making space for its development is crucial for the establishment of a balanced, creative humanity. Considering that promoting SMSC is of paramount importance in schools, it is essential to make room in the RE curriculum for discussion of the various ways people protect and access the introverted aspects of their personality (e.g. prayer, meditation, mindfulness, sitting in silence or in the midst of creative endeavour). This is of course linked to Ealing's approach to Reflection. It is important for the development of all children to learn quietude and an attitude of listening inward, regardless of the name they would give to that dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> See The Humanist Chaplaincy Network <http://www.humanistchaplains.org/>

<sup>2</sup> See the "Mustard Seed Humanist School" appeal (<https://newhumanist.org.uk/1549>) and <http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://foundationbeyondbelief.org/>

Possible activities	
Themes	Humanism
Stories that guide	Humanists look for wisdom and inspiration everywhere. No one source dominates and few are rejected on face value.
Answering life questions	There is no institutional authority that will provide definitive answers to the big questions. Everything is open to investigation, and the development of critical thinking is very important. So is the ability to formulate good questions.
Identity, diversity and belonging	No 'joining' ceremony, but there are humanist naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals. Humanists enjoy participating in rites of passage that enable them to feel part of a community. In our diverse culture it is important to be able to participate without having to share the beliefs.
Acting ethically	Recognise the need to be aware of the rules, customs and behaviours which typify members of a community and the necessity for certain rules; weigh rules against the promptings of their own 'conscience'; consider the basis of their own moral thinking and the beliefs which underpin it.

Possible activities	
Themes	Humanism
Humankind and the environment	Begin to explore the concept of 'secular stewardship', and the importance of an ethical approach in light of modern concerns about the environment.
Human experience and belief	Develop an understanding that common human experiences can elicit both religious and non-religious responses. Be able to critically examine explanations for why certain things happen.
Sources of inspiration	Begin to understand the necessity to develop a 'relationship' with sources of inspiration (e.g. learn to listen to/nurture new ideas); learn to discriminate between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' role models.
Human experience and spiritual expression	Finding time for the development and understanding of one's inner life; learning that there are many means (e.g. creative or sporting endeavours, service to the community) to have that sense of 'connectedness.' Meditation (e.g. pondering nature in solitude or in quiet groups) can help individuals find balance and inner peace.