Humanism in RE:
Why and where do I begin?

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Why should Humanism be part of RE?

The law requires Religious Education to be delivered in an ‘objective, critical and pluralistic manner’. In November 2015, in a case brought by three families (supported by the then British Humanist Association) against the Department for Education, the High Court ruled that, if GCSE Religious Studies were to meet the legal requirements for the provision of Religious Education (RE) in general, ‘the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs’ (Paragraph 39).

The law aside, non-religious world views are increasingly a feature of contemporary British society and therefore it is proper and necessary that they are treated with equal respect to religious perspectives in the classroom.

Acquiring knowledge and understanding of non-religious perspectives, including Humanism, helps learners to be able to appreciate that, as well as being home to a people belonging to a vast array of religious traditions, the UK is also full of people for who do not believe in a god or gods and for whom religious practices and affiliations are not part of life. A balanced and objective study of contemporary religion and belief must involve proper engagement with non-religious perspectives, including Humanism. Knowledge and understanding of non-religious perspectives on life will enhance learners’ potential to fully explore questions of belief, value, meaning, purpose, truth, and their influence on human life. It also helps deepen their understanding of the relationships between people in our pluralistic and diverse society; challenging learners to reflect on and develop their own values, beliefs and attitudes in the light of what they have learnt. Learning about non-religious views contributes to a learner’s preparation for adult life in a pluralistic society and global community.

Where do I begin?

Equip learners with key terminology. Ensure that they develop the confidence to use key a words such as theist, atheist and agnostic accurately.

Give learners a perspective on religion in their society and their communities. Use easily accessible data on local religious affiliation. Conducting faith surveys in lessons and comparing results with local and national data is a good way to open up discussions about beliefs and worldviews.
Do’s and Don’ts

Don’t make presumptions about the stance pupils or their families may have towards religion or belief: many non-religious people may be ‘spiritual but not religious’ and others may feel close to ‘Humanism with a capital H’ – but not belong to it. ‘Non-religious’ does not always mean ‘atheist’.

Do teach about the diversity of atheism and agnosticism. For example, many people are non-religious but describe their lives as ‘spiritual’. Some atheists think ‘spirituality’ is a meaningless word. Others use it to describe a natural feeling of awe and wonder or connection.

Don’t suggest that all atheists are the same. There is as much variety in non-religious belief as in different religions, and agnostics, atheists and others all see the world individually. Present students with a variety of examples (not just Richard Dawkins).

Do ensure you teach the values and beliefs non-religious people have – don’t just teach from a negative stance of ‘these people do NOT believe in a god or gods’.

Do use inclusive language wherever possible. E.g. ‘worldviews’ or ‘belief’ instead of ‘religions’ or ‘faith’.

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Do use inclusive language wherever possible. E.g. ‘worldviews’ or ‘belief’ instead of ‘religions’ or ‘faith’.

Don’t shy away from negative arguments about a worldview. Begin to equip older pupils with the mental tools to explore truth claims and ideas for themselves, and to set aside wooly thinking or unthinking prejudice about religion and worldviews.

Don’t try to only describe non-religious worldviews as a comparison to a religious lifestyle, for example there may not be yearly festivals above and beyond birthdays/anniversaries, or holy books that were written by religious leaders/are believed to be given by God. That is fine.

Do enable older pupils to learn about critiques of religion, arguments against faith in God or life after death and the view that religion is a negative factor in human life. Developing critical skills in relation to different views is part of RE’s core purpose.

Do teach pupils about the ways rituals, celebrations and the marking of key events may be done by non-religious people, e.g. in a civil wedding, on a ‘big day’ like New Year, or for the birth of a baby.
Avoid approaching non-religious beliefs as always diametrically opposed to religious beliefs. A non-religious perspective will not necessarily directly contradict or challenge religious views. Non-religious people often share many common values in their approaches to morality with religious people. Often they may reach similar or identical conclusions but for different reasons. However, a non-religious perspective is one that does not rely upon reference to religious sources of wisdom, such as religious leaders, sacred texts and so on. Instead, it is usually reasoned through logic, reference to science or through experience.

**Try to avoid speaking in the negative about humanism**

Most simply put, Humanism can be regarded as the ‘rejection of religion in favour of the advancement of humanity by its own efforts.’ (Collins Concise Dictionary)

However, many Humanists prefer to be defined in more positive terms. Whilst Humanism cannot be viewed as a religion, it is often described as a ‘worldview’ or a ‘belief system’, having a set of core tenets and values. Humanists UK sets out these values as follows:

A humanist...

- 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.

[https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/](https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/)

For many people, the realisation that they do not have faith in a god or gods can be a lonely and isolating experience, perhaps setting them at odds with their families, friends and their communities. Indeed, one of the undeniable benefits of organised religion for human wellbeing is the sense of belonging and acceptance within a community. For many people, belonging to a Humanist group or organisation, whilst it is certainly not regarded as a religion, fulfils this sense of belonging and togetherness. Teaching about Humanist celebrations, such as naming ceremonies, Humanist funerals and Humanist confirmations is essential. Throughout the UK (and the world) there are Humanist congregations who meet to celebrate and be part of a community. Often gathering involve talks from local philosophers or scientists and communal singing.

Humanism is often misconceived as being exclusively concerned with the progress and welfare of the human race. It is, however, better and more commonly understood as a trust in humanity to act for the benefit of all species and the environment as a whole, without recourse to motivation from a divine being or beings. This is aptly demonstrated in the work of Humanists for a Better World (H4BW), a campaigning arm of the Humanists UK.
How religious is the society in which we live?

Religions of England and Wales

Every 10 years the government carries out a census. This means every household in England and Wales answers questions about themselves. From this, they get a picture of who’s living here and what services they need to provide. Can you guess the results? Remember; your percentages all have to add up to 100!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>% population</th>
<th>Our guess</th>
<th>Actual %</th>
<th>+/-</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
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<td>Christian</td>
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<td>Check your numbers</td>
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<td>add up to 100</td>
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Finished?
Discuss these questions!

- Why do you think the question about religion was the only one that people didn’t have to answer?
- Do you think it was right to give people the choice whether or not to answer this?

Which was your most correct guess?
Which was your least correct guess?
What have you learnt from this?

Notes:____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
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Views on Creation

Sara
I love learning about how the world works. Did you know the Universe started with a single, powerful explosion, which made space, time and matter, all at once? This is called the Big Bang. I find this mind-blowing.

The Big Bang is not a belief. It is based on scientific evidence, such as the observation that the Universe is moving apart from a central point and cooling down. This suggests that in the past matter was closer together and the Universe was hotter.

I don’t have a problem with religion, but the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful being creating the Universe just seems outdated to me. I just don’t need the idea of God to understand how things work and how the Universe came to be. It seems a bit irrelevant to be honest.

Jess
I would not describe myself as religious although I don’t hate religion or anything. I would probably say I don’t know enough.

I was watching a programme on the Big Bang. I found it fascinating, but also hard to follow. I don’t really know what it means. I would say that the Big Bang is just as confusing as the idea of God. As far as I can see they are both beyond our understanding and there is no proof of either.

I don’t know if either is supposed to make a difference to my life, except I guess I exist. Is that fact down to God or the Big Bang, or something we don’t even know about yet?

Isaac
I would definitely describe myself as a Christian. I belong to a church and I try to live in line with Jesus’ teachings. But – and this might confuse you – I am also super keen on science, especially physics. I have absolutely no problem accepting the Big Bang theory and being a Christian. God gave humans this incredible gift of intelligence and with our intelligence we have worked out amazing things. We have worked out how to protect people from some diseases with a single injection, and we can fly, dive underwater and even get into space. All this is proof to me of the gift of intelligence God has given. The Universe is an incredible place; the more we find out about it the more our Creator appears even more incredible. Now we understand about the Big Bang, who knows what’s around the corner?
A focus on celebration: Welcoming a baby

- Welcoming a visitor
- Welcoming a baby
- Favourite celebrations
- Explore and design
- Non-religious birth celebration
- I promise to ...
- Our own ceremony

Tim says

We picked ‘special friends’ for our child. Special friends are a bit like grandparents but without the gap bit.

We invited family and friends.

Tim and I read poems.

We had some party banners for decoration.

Kerrie says

People gave cards and gifts to the baby. Mostly they were ‘new baby’ cards and we still have those.

People wrote some words for the new baby in special books. We have kept the books.

The baby-welcoming ceremony was important because we included the people who would help and care for our baby as he grows up.

George’s big sister Flo welcomes her brother. She reads a poem that she has written for the baby welcoming.

George’s special friends, grandparents and sister all said special words.

We served party food.
### Sorting opinions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-religious</th>
<th>Religious</th>
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| ‘Death is that golden key, That opens the palace of Eternity’  
John Milton (1608–1674) | ‘After death, people stay alive in our memories.’ |
| ‘This life is all there is. I need to take it by the scruff of the neck. Seize the day!’ | ‘Death is the end for my physical body but my soul, which is eternal, lives on.’ |
| ‘Family and friends, they are what matters most in life.’ | ‘As a well-spent day brings happy sleep, so life well used brings happy death.’  
Leonardo da Vinci |
| ‘Do not act as if you were going to live for a thousand years … while you are alive, while it is still possible, become a good person.’  
Marcus Aurelius (121–180) | ‘Death is the end. That is it. No life after death, no heaven, nothing.’ |
| ‘After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure.’  
Albus Dumbledore | ‘I throw everything I have into living as much as I possibly can, for if this is the only life we have it makes sense to try as much as possible to live life to the absolute full. Without trusting that some divine being will grant one (on the basis of no evidence) an eternity in paradise, whatever that means. I cannot think of anything duller. To live forever without my body ... eugh!’  
Stephen Fry |

- Which quotes could be said by non-religious people?
- Which quotes could be said by religious people?
- Which could be said by either group?
- How do you know?
Interpreting non-religious beliefs about life after death

Which of these quotes would be most suitable for a non-religious funeral? Why?

E. What matters is not that someone has died, but that they have lived. Let us concentrate today on the delight and wonder of their lives.

F. The same memories that bring us sorrow now, reminding of us of what is lost, will one day bring smiles as they remind us of what has been and can never be lost.

G. We have been remembering with love and gratitude a life that has ended. Let us now return to our homes and to our work, resolved that we who live on will use our lives more fully and to better purpose for having known … and having shared in their life.

H. The value of life lies not in the length of days, but in the use we make of them.
   Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592)

Which of these images would be most suitable for a non-religious funeral? Why?

A wreath of photos from the life of the person who has died.

A memory jar for people at the funeral to add memories to.

A heart full of seeds that will grow flowers in the spring after planting.
### Challenges to Religious Belief

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
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<tr>
<td>Advances in scientific understandings of the world, such as the Big Bang Theory, challenge religious views.</td>
<td>Religion seems boring and old-fashioned to some people – certainly fewer people are going to church.</td>
<td>Some religious teachings seem out of touch with how we see things today, e.g. teachings that limit women’s authority or teachings against homosexuality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being an atheist or agnostic is socially acceptable today – you can join atheist communities, e.g. Humanists UK and get together at Sunday Assemblies.</td>
<td>People have studied religious texts closely and have found contradictions in them and even question where they come from.</td>
<td>We live in a multicultural society – many different religions can’t all be right, so why follow any of them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is so much suffering in the world, how can people believe in an all-loving and all-powerful God?</td>
<td>These days, more people want to see hard evidence – they are not willing to accept things on faith alone anymore.</td>
<td>People sometimes associate religion with conflict, terrorism and denying people their human rights.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Avoiding Essentialism: Dealing with the Messiness of Real-Life Beliefs

“I am both agnostic and Buddhist. This is because I believe in the Buddhist lifestyle, but I am unsure about God(s).” (M, 12)

“I don’t think that the answers to the ‘deeper’ questions are important – happiness is important. If we try and keep others happy, it will make us happy and the good deeds may be repaid. The biggest evils are selfishness and ignorance. These cause the other ‘evils’ such as murder and abuse on earth.” (F, 14)

“I would love to feel I am a spiritual person, despite my lack of belief: however I do not know what spirituality truly is and how it feels.” (F, 17)

“I don’t think anything in the spiritual world is impossible. People can have “encounters” of their own and believe, but proving that anything spiritual does exist is more difficult. Religion in my view causes a lot of problems. Norms + values are created through religion which is good. However, religion acts as a divide amongst people in society. I take the good things from religion i.e. norms + values but don’t consider myself to be part of a religion due to my belief: that we should not be divided in the way religion divides us.’ (M, 16)

“It is the beauty of the natural world and the ironic twists of circumstance that affect our everyday lives, as well as the strength I feel I have gained from prayer, that convince me there is some ‘Force’ controlling our world; but how can we know? On a rational level, are we simply creating a sense of security for ourselves?” (F, 17)

“Neither do I believe or disbelieve in the existence of God, because God is not important to me & I do not feel that it is relevant to me to even bother discussing his existence with others or in my mind. I see the world as we know it as more relevant while we are alive.” (M, 15)

“I am unsure of the Christian idea of God but I do believe and hope there is something out there that we cannot truly understand. I don’t believe that life is just this; there must be more to it.”

“Having been baptised and believing in God I would classify myself as a Christian. I am not, however, dedicated to my religion, rarely go to church etc. I’ve developed doubts as I have become a more rational-minded person. At the moment I am uncertain about religion but retain a belief in God.” (F, 14)

“I can’t make up my mind. I’m nothing, but I’m not Atheist, I believe in my own ideas. believe in freedom.” (M, 13)

“I am an agnostic because I AM (LAZY).” (M, 13)

“God has never contacted me or done anything good for me.” (M, 12)

“I don’t really believe in God as no one can prove that he exists / existed. But then again I think that someone made the world.” (M, 12)

“Apart not particularly bothered about whether there is a god or not. I would much rather just get on with my life without having to think about it.” (F, 16)
Agnostic Acrostic
Calvin Ross, 12.
Am not sure about God
Go and find him in heaven
Never seen him before
Only find out when I’m dead
Some believe, some don’t
Time to find out if he’s real
Is he real or is he not
Calvin doesn’t know

Classroom Activity:
What could your students create with this framework for a poem?

Positive Poem

Humanists believe...
Humanists do....
Humanists think...

Humanists search...
Humanists find...
Humanists love...

Humanists make...
Humanists dream...
Humanists hope....
A Liberal Decalogue

Bertrand Russell (1951)

1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
2. Do not think it worth while to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
3. Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.
4. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavour to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
6. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent that in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool’s paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.

Alternative commandments?
Non-commandments?
Do humans need rules given to them? To what extent? Who or what can have the authority to make these rules?

Possible classroom activities:
- Compare and contrast with the Ten Commandments, school rules or another set of humanist non-commandments (e.g. Ronald Fletcher, 1963)
- Encourage pupils to make their own set of commandments or non-commandments as a class or as individuals

An alternative...

Humanist Non-Commandments

(Ronald Fletcher, 1963)

1) Never accept authority (unless there are good grounds for it)
2) Base your conduct upon simple humane principles
3) Strive to eliminate war
4) Strive to eliminate poverty, and work for greater material prosperity for all
5) Do not be a snob
6) In sexual behaviour, use your brains as well as your genitals and always in that order
7) Enjoy family life and marriage
8) Respect the law
9) Commit yourself to active citizenship
10) Have confidence in the modern world and in your powers to improve it
Nine Non-Religious Women of Note  
(in order of date of birth)

1. **Marie Curie** (1867-1934)  
Polish-born scientist and double Nobel Prize winner. One of the famous scientists of all time. She discovered two new chemical elements – radium and polonium and conducted the first research into the treatment of tumours with radiation. She and her husband, Pierre won a Nobel Prize in 1903, and Marie went on to win another in 1911 in her own right. She was not only the first female Nobel laureate, but remains the only woman to have won a Nobel Prize in two different fields. Brought up as a Roman Catholic, she became an atheist on the death of her mother and older sister. She abandoned the Church and married Pierre Curie in a civil ceremony, later writing, "Pierre belonged to no religion and I did not practice any."

2. **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908-1986)  
Existentialist philosopher and advocate for women’s rights. Author of The Second Sex, in which she argued that men had created God in their own image and likeness to legitimate and seal their claims to power.

3. **Polly Toynbee** (born 1946)  
Former Guardian columnist, broadcaster and President of the British Humanist Association from 2007 to 2012. She has written extensively on social and political topics.

4. **Ophelia Benson** (born c.1948)  
Seattle-based philosopher, and avid blogger. Benson frequently contributes to The Guardian newspaper and to The Philosophers’ Magazine, where she writes a weekly review of philosophy blogs. She claims that “religion remains the last great prop and stay of arbitrary injustices and the coercion which backs them up.”

5. **Angela Gorman** (born 1948)  
Cardiff-based founder and CEO of the international charity, Life for African Mothers, which has saved tens of thousands of women by providing essential port-partum medication, training midwives to work in some of the poorest countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and providing care and education to women and their communities. Angela recently received a ‘Points of Light’ award from Prime Minister, Theresa May.

6. **Susan Blackmore** (born 1951)  
English popular science author. Having written a PhD in parapsychology, she became highly sceptical of this field and has made a career from debunking paranormal claims. She is an outspoken critic of religion and a Fellow of the Committee for Sceptical Inquiry, and author of the Meme Machine.

7. **Sandi Toksvig** (born 1958)  
British-Danish TV personality, writer, producer and patron of Humanists UK. She is also a political activist, instrumental in co-founding the Women’s Equality Party in 2015.

8. **Shappi Khorsandi** (born 1972)  
British-Iranian comedian and author and former Humanists UK president. Her family fled Iran after her poet father wrote a satire criticising the Islamic revolution.

9. **Professor Alice Roberts** (born 1973)  
Anatomist, author, broadcaster and President of Humanists UK

Understanding the contributions of these significant women redresses the balance of male narrative in the RE classroom and challenges the widely held perception that people who live without God or religion lack moral integrity.

Possible Classroom Activities

- Picture board: Display pictures of this women. Who do pupils recognise? What do they know about them?
- Group research and peer teaching project, with each group becoming an expert on one of these women.
- Impact assessment: which of these women has made the most important contributions? Why?
- Who’s not on the list? Who would you add… from the past, living and famous or a woman you know?
“I wish I could find a God to believe in. It ought to be simple – decide to believe, stop being a smart-arse, find a church, temple, mosque, woodland ritual, statue of a thing, special book or ritualistic dance, and get stuck in. I know a great number of people far cleverer than me who believe in God without any trouble at all. So why can’t I?”

“Though I seek to express myself through comedy a lot of the time, there are some things I’m deadly serious about, and the desire for a workable and available Deity in my life is one of them...

I wish there was a God. I wish for that God to exist now and for all time. I wish to be fully conscious of God and more importantly for Him to be fully conscious of me. I wish for God to be powerful, infinitely wise, kind, loving, fair....”

How would a religious believer reply to this? What about a Humanist? How would YOU reply to this?

What might make this good RE?

• High quality real life stimulus
• Driven by a big question
• Open to pupils’ individual responses
• Demanding and challenging of their intellectual skills
• Fun