HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION KEY STAGES 3, 4 and 5
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HUMANISM: A NON-RELIGIOUS BELIEF SYSTEM

Humanism is a non-religious ‘belief system’, a way of thinking about what it means to be a human being, and a ‘moral system’ about how to live our lives well.

For Humanists, living our lives well means trying to increase human happiness and well-being in this world, and to help lessen suffering and unhappiness that is avoidable. We can all see people suffering and feel compassion for their suffering, and Humanists feel a responsibility to help in whatever way they can.

This gives Humanists strong beliefs about what is good and right, and what is bad and wrong. As human beings, we can see what sorts of thinking and behaving cause happiness and suffering. We do this by using evidence from history and from our experience of what we see going on around us every day. We work out our beliefs about what is right and wrong, or good and bad, by using our reasoning powers.

Humanists also think that we can use our reasoning power to work out for ourselves how to put our beliefs into action. This is not always easy because situations are complicated, so we need to think carefully about how to act to be sure that our actions have the results we want. This is where we can often learn from the thinking and experience of other human beings.

Many people share these Humanist beliefs and ideas, even if they do not call themselves Humanists. Many religious people will agree with these ideas and beliefs too. But Humanism is different from most religious belief systems because Humanists do not have a faith. This means that Humanists do not believe in supernatural powers acting in this world.

Humanists do not believe that there is a God who commands us to have certain beliefs or to live our lives in a certain way, and rewards or punishes us for what we have done or not done in this life. Humanists do not believe that we each have a soul that exists forever, nor that there is an after-life of either joy in Heaven or suffering in Hell as a result of how well we live this life.

Instead, Humanists believe that this life is all we have, and that we should live it as well as we can. We should use our own understanding and feelings to deal with problems, in cooperation with and learning from others, because this is all the knowledge that we have and all that we can rely on. We should do this for the benefit of humanity, not because it will benefit us as individuals in the future.
INTRODUCTION TO HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES

The following ten Humanist perspectives are offered to secondary school teachers for information as to how the non-religious belief system of Humanism relates to themes commonly included in religious education.

Introducing some of these perspectives and including an appropriate activity when these are relevant to teaching will show students that even if people (perhaps their parents) do not believe in God, they still have beliefs, feelings and values that help them lead a good life. This should help students without faith to begin to explore religious belief and concepts in a sympathetic spirit.

You will find the information about each of the Humanist Perspectives in the first page about each theme. Each Perspective then includes suggestions for teaching and learning activities that you may find useful.

To avoid sub-headings the Perspectives are divided into sections by dotted lines. The suggested teaching and learning activities follow the same pattern.

Some of the suggested teaching and learning activities indicated by two stars (**) raise more challenging concepts, and you may feel these are more appropriate for older students at Key Stage 4 and/or Key Stage 5.

Some of the following Humanism Perspectives include reference to teaching resources which are available on www.humanismforschools.org.uk the British Humanist Association’s website.
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 1

BELIEFS AND KNOWLEDGE

Humanists strongly believe in principles for living a good life, but they do not believe that these originate from ‘supernatural’ powers. Humanist principles are not unchanging articles of faith, but guidelines derived from experience of life and observation of the consequences of action. These guidelines include concerns to promote happiness and reduce misery, a respect for the potential value of every human being, and a determination to live our one life as well as possible. They are guidelines that can be applied to changing situations and allow Humanists to respond appropriately to new knowledge and understanding.

For Humanists, all beliefs must pass the test of reason. Humanists only trust what their reason tells them they can know from their own experience and that of others. In the same way that scientists think, Humanists need proof for all statements and beliefs. They constantly ask questions about things, but do not believe there anything can be known with absolute certainty. Humanists try and work out for themselves the meaning and purpose of life, what they believe in and what they value. They believe that only you can decide for yourself what you believe in, and that everyone has the right to do this.

Humanists cannot accept claims for a final ‘truth’ or interpretation of life, whether these come from religious or non-religious sources. They observe that these claims have invariably led to authoritarianism, indoctrination, persecution, crusades and jihads. Humanist principles are a guarantee against all such anti-human outcomes.

Humanists therefore do not believe in the existence of an active God, because his or her existence cannot be proved. But Humanists have a variety of views about whether there may be a God or not. Some Humanists are quite sure there is no God, which means they are ‘atheists’, while many others honestly do not know whether there is a God or not, which means they are ‘agnostics’. But for all practical purposes no Humanist believes in an active God of any kind. Nor do Humanists believe in an act of creation, eternal souls, a judgement day or an after-life in Heaven or Hell. Humanists also note that there are highly respected non-theistic religious traditions like Theravada Buddhism that are very similar to their own belief system in this respect.

Humanists have many clear values that they share with most human beings, such as love, respect, unselfishness, and the capacity to feel compassion for others, to care for others and cooperate with them. These values rest on a clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong, derived from our own experience and that of humanity in general. They are values that help give meaning and purpose to life: for example, because human beings share so many values, Humanists believe that divisions of race, gender, class, ability or belief should not be allowed to separate us.
Humanists cannot answer so-called ‘ultimate questions’ about why life began and whether it continues after death. They do not think that we will ever know, and do not think that it matters. Humanists have a secular view of life, which means that it ends with our death. We have only this one life, which is therefore incredibly precious and should be lived as well as possible, irrespective of anything that might or might not happen afterwards.

For Humanists the end of life should be as dignified as possible. Life should not end in prolonged suffering from terminal illness, as modern medicine now makes possible. So Humanists strongly support the campaigns for a change in the law to allow ‘assisted dying’, or ‘dying with dignity’, for those facing terminal illness and suffering, with all necessary safeguards to protect the individuals concerned. This ‘right to die’ will ease suffering, and maintain the quality of life, which is for Humanists even more important than the fact of life itself.

**Suggested teaching and learning activities**

Ask students in pairs to draw up lists of: ‘five things I know’ and ‘five things I believe’ and discuss the differences between the two lists.

Explore with students what makes people change their beliefs, and whether it is easier for religious or non-religious people to change their beliefs.

Use British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 5, video clip ‘Is there a God?’ Humanists present the case that there is no proof of a God, that many people keep an open mind, and that the fact of suffering suggests that any God is not all-loving. Then discuss what other things as well as God Humanists cannot believe in, and what challenges a lack of faith presents to Humanists.

Use British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 4, video clip ‘Thoughts on God’ (gods only exist in men’s thoughts (Feuerbach); miracles are violations of nature (Hume); ‘design in nature’ (six day creation) fails as an argument (Darwin); we cannot accept a God who punishes as well as rewards his own creatures (Einstein). Each of these brief statements is elaborated in Worksheet4c ‘Is God True?’ Ask groups of students to choose one statement, then explore with them what makes a statement true, and whether some of these statements are more true than others. Explore with students what do Humanists believe in, if they do not believe in God.

** If you have studied Buddhism with the students, you could explore the similarities between this ‘world faith’ and Humanism; if many (Theravada) Buddhists do not believe in God, what it is they do believe in, and whether Buddhism is a religion or a belief system like Humanism.

Explore with students why religions have creeds and sacred books, and whether putting a belief into a sacred book makes it more certain or true.
Class debate:
‘Should people be punished in an afterlife if they cannot believe in a God in this life?’

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** Consider asking students to rate themselves (preferably anonymously) on Richard Dawkins’ ‘Scale of Probabilities’ in ‘The God Delusion’ (pp. 50-51), from 1 (strong theist) to 7 (strong atheist). This will introduce them to the concepts of agnosticism and atheism. It will also challenge them to think out and question the nature of their belief. This could provide a basis for exploring what reasoning power makes possible, and how this is a distinctively human capacity.

Explore with students what reasons atheists might find for why people believe in a God, and what arguments atheists would use against religion.

Explore with students whether doubt and uncertainty is a strength or a weakness.

** Class debate:
‘Atheists are as fundamentalist as the believers they criticise’
‘Agnostics are people who cannot make up their minds’.

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Group work. Examine newspaper advertisements and posters to work out what the writers want us to believe, and what values they want us to have. Explore with students what they think are the dominant values in contemporary Britain.

** Compare their values with those of their parents or grandparents.

Explore with students what they would expect religious people to value, and how they show this in their lives, and whether non-believers live different lives with different values.

Group work. What values are the women who choose to wear the veil (burka) or face covering (niqab) asserting? Are these valid? Should women have the right to do this in public? Should it disqualify them from certain jobs (eg teaching)?

Explore with students how far we should all respect the views and cultural practices of others.

Design an individual coat of arms to display their own values.

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Ask the students to discuss how they would feel and respond if someone they know well and like requested euthanasia. They could consider issues like quality of life – whether we should allow an animal to suffer if it is dying in pain or put it out of its misery, and whether the same should apply to human beings if that is what a person wants, and if not, why not.
** Class debate:
‘Does modern medicine strengthen the case for legalising voluntary euthanasia?’
‘Euthanasia should be available as a human right in cases of terminal suffering to everyone who requests it.’
‘Modern ethics should be based on quality of life rather than the sanctity of life.’

** Explore with the students whether we have souls or minds. Can our souls or minds survive without the brain, and is any evidence for the survival of a soul and an afterlife?
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 2

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Humanists believe that science and natural explanations can explain how the Universe and all life has come to be the way it is. Many religious believers will accept this. But a big difference emerges when we look for explanations of why the Universe and life began and its ultimate origins. Religious believers ascribe this to God, but some scientists believe that studying the ‘Big Bang’ may provide us with other answers. Other scientists and most Humanists will say that we cannot know the answer to this type of question and do not need to.

Modern scientific thinking began to develop about 500 years ago, and nourished Humanist thinking because both those use the scientific method of investigation and Humanist thinkers take a secular, non-religious view of the world. Humanists think in a scientific way, approaching problems by looking at the evidence to examine accepted explanations and changing their views if the evidence shows this to be necessary. This is a reasoning approach, in the tradition of Socrates in Athens who questioned accepted ideas (hypotheses), considered alternative ideas (antitheses) and came to new understandings (syntheses) that often combined elements of both earlier ideas.

This way of thinking is different to religious belief. Humanists only accept explanations that can be proved true or false scientifically. So Humanists cannot accept belief that cannot be proved. Moreover, Humanists do not accept that any explanations or understandings can be absolutely true because they may be disproved by new evidence, so they only apply in the circumstances that we know. This means that Humanists keep their minds open to new ideas, especially in times of rapid change.

So it is not surprising that the development of science led to conflicts with the Church. When Galileo 400 years ago proved with the use of a telescope that the sun is at the centre of our part of the Universe, he challenged the Church’s teaching at the time that because human beings have a central place in God’s plan the earth is at the centre of the Universe. He was tried by the Inquisition, found guilty of ‘heresy’ and confined to his home for the rest of his life.

When Charles Darwin 150 years ago developed the theory that life forms have evolved over long periods of time by natural selection through chance alterations, he challenged the views of many religious believers that life forms, including human beings, were created by God at a particular time. This led to bitter debates that have not ceased, because evolutionary thinking implies that there is no need for a God to create life or keep the world going because all changes happen by natural responses to changing circumstances. It also means that human beings are animals (though very clever ones).
In response, some religious thinkers have recently developed theories of Creationism and Intelligent Design to meet the challenge that evolution presents to their beliefs. Creationism is essentially an insistence on the accuracy of the six-day creation found in Genesis. Intelligent Design accepts the idea of evolutionary changes, but argues that this just shows the ways in which God works as the creator of life and the designer of laws that keep life developing. Supporters of both theories demand that they are taught alongside ‘god-less’ evolution in science lessons as equally valid explanations.

**Suggested teaching and learning activities**

Use the British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 4, video clips *’Do you agree?’* Six statements on miscellaneous topics (eg pain, ghosts, Henry 8’s wives) are analysed for the evidence they rest on. Worksheet 4a *’Using reason and evidence to decide what is true’* outlines the stages in scientific investigation: securing evidence, making a hypothesis, testing it, finding more evidence, choosing the simplest explanation.

Give students in groups four statements once widely believed: the earth is flat, the sun moves round the earth, cheese creates mice, and placing a herb in a room cures the plague. Ask the students, as scientists at the time, to plan experiments to test if these opinions are accurate. Then research how Magellan, Galileo, Mendel and Pasteur respectively disproved each of them. Present their work as a display.

Ask students to tick the following statements about religion true or false, first from a Humanist standpoint and then as a religious believer. Religion:

- answers questions that science cannot answer
- is a testament to human creativity and imagination
- has profound insights and wisdom
- can damage the scientific pursuit of knowledge
- can prevent the beneficial consequences of scientific investigation and so reduces human happiness
- can restrict freedom of thought.

Some possible points for discussion with students:
- differences between Humanist knowledge and religious knowledge
- the importance of having an ‘open’ mind to secure knowledge
- whether scientists change their views, and why (or why not)
- bias and how this may close our minds.

** Explore with students:
** whether religion has to be in conflict with science, and how this can be overcome.
** whether the only form of knowledge is about things can be proved true or false.
** why scientists (and Humanists) cannot accept the idea of miracles.
** how Humanists can be content with less than certain knowledge.
Explore with students why Darwin’s theory of evolution made (and still makes) many religious people angry.

** Explore with students whether people can believe in evolution and still be religious, and why some scientists are religious believers.

Group work:
** Find out about the ‘Scopes Trial’ in America in 1924 when a teacher was put on trial for teaching evolution in school.
** Find out which religions accept the findings of modern ‘western’ science (Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism) and which do not.

** Class debate ‘Charles Darwin is a threat to the value of human life’

Explore with students how scientists think that the Universe and Earth began, and with the children how this is different from the story in Genesis. (They might mention the ‘Big Bang’, which would be interesting to follow up!)

This topic can be linked to a study of Creation myths of different religions if that is felt appropriate at this level. If so, you could ask students to list the similar elements in creation stories, list the differences between the creation stories and Darwin’s explanation, and suggest how Humanists would criticise the Creation stories.

** Explore with students the ways in which the Intelligent Design theory challenges the theory of evolution, and how Humanists can respond to Intelligent Design as a challenge to the idea of evolution without God.

** Class debate: ‘This school should teach Creationism and Intelligent Design alongside evolutionary theory in science lessons.’
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 3

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Despite their secular thinking, many (though not all) Humanists believe that there is a spiritual dimension to life, a capacity in the 'human spirit' to be inspired. This spiritual dimension can be a sense of awe and wonder, a love of beauty or a heightened sense of awareness. It can be created by nature, or by human beings as they seek to give the best expression to their vision in art and architecture, their feelings and emotions in literature and music, and their thinking in philosophy.

Humanists feel that this dimension to life is something all human beings can experience. We can use our emotions and our capacity for reason to open up to these experiences and enjoy and benefit from them. We experience them at different levels, according to how meaningful they are for us, but some can be life-changing. For Humanists these experiences help us all find meaning and purpose in life. They could even be described as providing our 'ultimate concerns'.

From the standpoint of Humanists who recognise a spiritual dimension, religious experience, including religious art, painting and music as well as a sense of the divine, is only one example of spiritual experience. Humanists do not accept that spiritual awareness is reserved for those who have faith in a supernatural order, nor that that awareness is superior to other forms of human experience.

For some Humanists another aspect of spirituality is the sense of right and wrong (terms that Humanists prefer to 'good' and 'evil') that all human beings share. We are all aware of these concepts through our own experiences of the outcomes of our actions. We all feel the effects of right and wrong as members of society, drawing on our collective memory through our history and our collective experience of contemporary events. This sense of right and wrong is an awareness that acts as a force for action in the world, whether a person has religious belief or not. But for Humanists this awareness is not God-given, because we use our reason and our emotions to understand the importance of the underlying concepts.

Suggested teaching and learning activities:

Explore with students any experiences (both religious and non-religious) that might be described as ‘spiritual’. You might show them extracts from videos of David Attenborough’s programmes that stimulate awe and wonder, play excerpts from music that generate strong feelings such as Tchaikovsky’s 1812 overture, Richard Strauss’s opening to ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra’, Katchachurian’s love theme from ‘Spartacus’, or show them paintings that have a similar effect like Picasso’s ‘Guernica’, or read a poem you find particularly moving. You could then discuss
which of these experiences students feel are particularly significant for them, and why.

You could point out that none of these experiences are ‘religious’ as such, and compare them with appropriate religious experiences such as an excerpt from a favourite Mass or from Handel’s ‘Messiah’, or a painting of the Crucifixion as a study in suffering, or Psalm 23.

Explore with students whether we can all be creative, for example in learning activities, and create things of beauty that provide a spiritual experience.

Explore with students whether they find the ‘non-religious’ or the ‘religious’ experiences most significant.

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** Explore with students whether ideas of right and wrong (or feelings of good and bad) are part of our spiritual life.

** Explore with students whether having nothing beyond this life to look forward to means that we are less able to appreciate the spiritual dimension.
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 4

MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

Humanists do not believe that people have souls, or that there is an afterlife in Heaven, Hell or Purgatory, or that there is a God who judges where people go in an afterlife. They believe that we only have this life, and that it ends forever when we die.

But Humanists are not depressed by this lack of belief. They feel that this means that they have nothing to worry about when they die, so they should live this one life as well as possible, and make themselves and other people as happy as possible. If they do this, Humanists believe that they will have lived meaningful lives.

Like most human beings, Humanists try to find some meaning and purpose in life. They have no agreed answer to the ‘ultimate questions’ of what life means and what it is for, but they do agree that any answers can only be found within this life and this world. Many people have written about their answers to these questions, and Humanists are ready to learn from their ideas, but believe that we each have to do this for ourselves in our own situation, and respond in our own special way.

For Humanists, meaning can be defined as using our reason to understand what is happening and why, and purpose as using our power for compassion to help in our own ways to promote happiness and well-being both now and in the future. For Humanists there are many meanings and purposes to life, and it is our responsibility to come to our own understanding of what fits for us, and to make our lives as meaningful and purposeful as possible.

Suggested teaching and learning activities

Introduce students to the Humanists’ symbol ‘the Happy Human’, and the message of ‘aspiration’. Then explore with them what Humanists might aspire towards, and how these aspirations might provide useful purposes for life.

Other approaches include study of an inspirational Humanist and exploration of the purposes in that person’s life, or providing students with newspaper articles that show examples of people today with a purpose in their lives, and asking them in groups to choose the one they admire most.

You might draw up with the students a list of things that can make a life meaningful (eg friendship, helping others, being good, seeking knowledge, enjoying beauty) and ask the children to choose which they think is the most important.

Use British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 6, video clip ‘Where do Humanists find meaning and purpose in life?’ Humanists present several useful suggestions to make life rewarding and fulfilling.
Use British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 6 Worksheet 6c ‘Quotations from Humanists.’ Six short passages from Humanists including Isaiah Berlin, Clare Raynor, George Eliot, Richard Dawkins and Fenner Brockway give a variety of interesting views on the meaning and purpose of life. Ask the students in groups to rank the points made by the writers in the order of their importance. Then choose one of the six passages each and write an agreed response to it – which could be either a critique or an appreciation.

One approach to the challenging issues of meaning and purpose in life for Humanists could be to explore with students why the Humanist’s belief that this is the one life we have does not depress them but makes it important to live it well. Use the British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 6, video clip ‘Is this the only life we have?’ in which five Humanists, including Philip Pullman present a variety of considerations. Explore with students how Humanists can find meaning in life without a belief in God.

Class debates:
'Living this life to the full gives us all the meaning and purpose we need in life.'
**'Heaven and Hell are figments of the human imagination’.

Invite a local Humanist and a local religious leader in to present their views of the purpose of their lives. Students could then compare the rewards that religious people and Humanists would expect from living a good life.
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 5

AUTHORITY

Humanists distrust authorities, especially any that originate in a ‘supernatural’ world and require unquestioning belief. Humanists believe that history shows that authorities only too easily engage in indoctrination. Religious authorities have often persecuted non-believers and critics of accepted beliefs, for example Galileo, to ensure conformity to their doctrines.

Religious authorities also attempt to influence governments, through, for example, the right of bishops to vote on social issues in the House of Lords, and to defend rights to discriminate in education and employment. Humanists see this as unfair privilege that affect the lives of all of us and reduces our rights.

The authority that Humanists do accept is the reasoning power of an open mind. They learn from thinkers who have taken this approach such as John Locke, Thomas Paine, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell. But they will not accept control by an authority over their minds. They reject dogmas and oppose any indoctrination or persecution that closes people’s minds and discourages them from thinking for themselves. Humanists think that people should be encouraged and trusted to think for themselves and make up their own minds on issues. This is the hallmark of a democratic society.

Humanists believe that only free enquiry and discussion can create understanding. This applies the principles of scientific thinking (see Perspective 2 above) to all human affairs, and enables us to make rational responses to situations and issues, taking all relevant considerations into account and avoiding harm to others.

This open-minded approach means that Humanists are ready to change their opinions if evidence demands it. They feel that because religious believers rely on doctrines they are less likely to question or change their beliefs and opinions.

An open-minded approach also means that Humanists will wish to see changes in the laws if these no longer promote human happiness and well-being. Humanists obey the authority of the law, but will seek to change it if it needs improvement. They believe that this approach is essential if we are to cope with the rapid changes in life that we are now experiencing, and that doctrines and dogma hinder us in doing so. Religious privileges give doctrinal opinions unjustified and damaging influence.

Suggested teaching and learning activities

Explore with students the reasons why Galileo Galilei, an astronomer whose observations proved that the earth revolves around the sun, was put on trial and
imprisoned in 1632? You might role-play this event. You could then compare Galileo’s experience with that of, say, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma.

** Explore with the students why people are persecuted, and perhaps organise a class debate on ‘freedom of thought is a universal human right’.

Arrange a visit from a member of Amnesty International, and get students to prepare questions for the speaker.

Explore with students any privileges they know that they think are unfair, and whether they think that religious privileges are unfair too.

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Explore with students who they obey – this will include religious and non-religious authorities. Ask students for a rule that each of these authorities makes and why they obey them. Then give them (or ask them to suggest) examples of religious and non-religious rules that allow no disagreement (ie teachings or doctrines). You might explore why religions have doctrines and why religious people value them.

Then introduce students to the idea of dogma. Explore with students whether religious beliefs tend to lead to dogmatic opinion, and to conflict or persecution. Do they have they any dogmatic opinions of their own? You could then explore with students the dangers of indoctrination and dogmatism, and why humanists oppose both. That would help students to work out some of the basic principles of Humanism.

** Explore with students whether it is only religious people who tend to be dogmatic, or whether this is just human nature.

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Explore with students what authorities Humanists will obey, and which teachers they may follow. Do these teachings have the same effect as doctrines?

You might then explore whether we can all work out our own principles for living, or whether we need the authority of a god and belief in rewards and punishments in an afterlife to behave well.

** Explore with students whether we need changes in our laws to help us cope with the rapid changes in life that we are now experiencing, whether these will need changes in our beliefs and whether doctrinal opinions help or hinder our responses to change.
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 6

MORALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Humanism is an ethical system, a set of moral values by which we can live a good life even though we do not believe in a god. Humanists have as strong a belief in right and wrong as anyone else. They believe that these concepts have evolved as societies developed. People came to see that working with and supporting others helped their group prosper, and that selfish, unfeeling behaviour damaged everyone. We have seen this throughout history and can see it in the present day. So for Humanists an awareness of what is right and good, or wrong and bad, is part of our shared experience; morality is natural to us as thinking, caring human beings.

There is a long tradition of secular thinking that we can recognise as Humanist, even if the term is a recent one. 2,500 years ago Greek thinkers like Epicurus thought the gods had little interest in human life, and so developed a morality based on the happiness and contentment of human beings. Modern Humanists too believe that morality is a matter of human compassion and understanding. We all feel happiness and suffering, so we should treat others as we would like them to treat us, and not do anything to others that we would not want them to do to us. This is the ‘Golden Rule’.

We can find the ‘Golden Rule’ in most religions (see British Humanist Association poster ‘The Golden Rule’), but for Humanists it does not come from supernatural guidance and support. Humanism declares that we can be good without believing in a god, and do not need the promise of rewards in Heaven or punishment in Hell to behave well. Instead we should live this one life well because this is better for everyone. Humanists think this is a better motive than fear of punishment in hell or hope for reward in heaven.

Humanists all agree on a number of guiding principles for living a good life. The Golden Rule is a central principle of avoiding harm to others, but this is followed in order to promote well-being and reduce suffering because we are sensitive to the needs of others, responsible and compassionate. As Jeremy Bentham wrote, we should act so as to promote ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. This is entirely opposed to any concept that suffering is ‘ordained’. It is also a challenging concept in a time of growing inequality and imminent shortages as a result of most of us seeking happiness through material possessions. In this situation Humanist morality demands a change in our life style to consider the well being of others as well as our own, as part of being responsible to others. This is one example of how Humanist morality gives meaning and purpose to life.

Humanist principles are universal, but they can – as all guidelines should – apply to changing circumstances. This means that Humanist moral principles do not lead to
one single code of behaviour or one set of laws, because life throws up an endless variety of situations to which we have to respond. For Humanists this demands compassion but also the use of our reasoning power to assess these situations, predict the likely outcomes of our actions, and change our behaviour if necessary.

So, for example, in human relationships Humanists value marriage, but accept that divorce may be necessary to reduce unhappiness. They uphold the rights of single parents and those in other stable partnerships. Humanists value sexual enjoyment in all forms that cause no harm to others, accept homosexuality and lesbianism, and oppose homophobia. While regretting that abortion is sometimes felt necessary, Humanists support the right of all women to safe abortion as an alternative to unhappiness and suffering. Humanists support the right of all human beings to a death with dignity. In all these respects Humanists will seek changes in the present laws to support their principles, although there may well be disagreements on the precise changes that are needed to ensure the best outcomes.

For human relationships: we all make mistakes, we are all capable of selfish behaviour, we all disagree with others on certain issues, and need understanding and forgiveness. But Humanists do not see this as part of any ‘original sin’ or the work of the devil! Equally, Humanists see a human capacity for forgiveness, and this is part of Humanist morality. The Golden Rule to treat others as we would hope to be treated ourselves requires us to forgive mistakes and selfish behaviour and to accept different views, as we hope others will do for us. Once again, this is not the result of some divine mercy or ‘redemption’, but the outcome of our reasoning, compassion and common sense.

However, it is not easy to forgive, and sometimes behaviour is so inhuman that forgiveness seems impossible, so the best we can do is work to make sure that whatever needs forgiving does not happen again.

**Suggested teaching and learning activities**

Ask students to imagine they are a group of castaways (the ‘Lord of the Flies’ scenario). Get them to explore what qualities they will all have to have if they are to survive, what behaviour will be useful to the group, what behaviour that will threaten their survival, and whether this gives them any clues to what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Then tell them the outcome in the story! (This might tie in well with work in literature that explores these and many other themes important to RE.)

Present students with a moral dilemma, such as finding an expensive football match ticket in the playground. Use the British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 5, video clip ‘Answering moral dilemmas’: in this scenario the worksheet presents options emphasises the need to use our reason and our empathy.

Looking more widely, the British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 5 provides video clips on four ethical issues: wealth, animal rights, freedom of speech and war. Groups could discuss a chosen issue and decide on what the Humanist stance
would be and why. Explore with students whether the ‘Golden Rule’ works well in these four situations, and perhaps think of other situations where it is not enough on its own.

You might also explore with students ways in which they would want to be treated and not want to be treated, and also to what extent their school rules show the Golden Rule in action.

Another approach could give groups a current news story, ask them for their response to it and whether they think a Humanist would respond in the same way.

** Explore with students:
- whether we should be free to choose our own moral values without some authority to tell us what they should be
- how we can tell good from bad if we do not believe in God
- whether we can reason out what is right and wrong from the outcomes of our actions
- whether we need fear of punishment or hope of reward in an afterlife to make and keep us good
- whether the similarities in the moral codes of the major world religions suggests that moral principles are human or religious in origin.

To explore the concept of happiness in a good life, introduce students to the Humanist symbol ‘The Happy Human’. What does this suggest about the nature of happiness?

Explore with students things that have made them happy recently – good or bad, but hopefully including some good or kind activity they’ve been involved in! – and whether helping others makes them feel better and happier.

Then you could discuss with students the things that make people in general happy, including material possessions and non-material aspects of life (perhaps listing some of these), and which students feel Humanists would think are the more important.

** A class debate could be organised on ‘Love of money is the root of all evil’.

Bringing the Humanist perspective into exploration of moral issues in human relationships as part of RE is not difficult. You could present students with an issue in the form of a situation in which they find themselves involved either personally or as a friend, and ask them to decide, using compassion, a concern for happiness and the Golden Rule, how they would try to advise and support everyone involved in the situation. For example:

- two young people discussing whether to use contraceptives
- a teenager afraid to tell her parents that she is pregnant and wants an abortion
- one of their classmates being called a ‘gay’ or a ‘lezzie’
- a young person being bullied who is contemplating suicide.

It would be helpful to raise issues with students such as the consequences of particular actions, the need to consider the happiness and rights of all involved, and the responsibilities of those aware of the situation. After the discussion you might explore whether some religious believers have different views, eg that we should feel guilt in sexual enjoyment because of some ‘original sin’, that the sanctity of life is more important than concerns for the quality of life, that homosexuality is ‘wrong’ or ‘evil’, or that victims of bullying must cope with their experience.

**You might also with older students consider organising debates on challenging topics such as:
- ‘Sex should only be within marriage’
- ‘Informing young people about sex will only encourage promiscuous behaviour’
- ‘Abortion should be available on demand to every woman who requests it’
- ‘Gay people who feel confident enough to ‘come out’ deserve our support’.

Exploring forgiveness with students could include reflecting on whether the Golden Rule implies forgiveness, what the consequences of not forgiving are, and whether it is possible to ‘forgive and forget’.

** Group work on forgiveness could include exploration of Jesus Christ’s requirement that we should turn the other cheek if offended, or give even more than is demanded of us – how this can be justified, whether this is realistic, what it is likely to achieve.
Rights and Responsibilities

Humanists of all persuasions support human rights on the grounds of the unique value of each human being and their right to happiness. This means that all human beings have the same rights, so long as they do not use them to harm others. It also means that Humanists oppose and seek to reduce all avoidable suffering. In this respect Humanists find themselves critical of a great deal of religious teaching that sees suffering as either ordained for humanity because of our failings, or a source of ennoblement with reward in some future life.

Humanists therefore welcome all the changes in laws that have helped to secure human rights in Britain and helped make Britain a more equal society because they know that laws are essential to secure justice. Humanists recognise that people are not equal in talents or qualities, but they believe in equality of treatment and opportunity to give everyone as fair a chance in life as possible. Common sense tells us that this is complicated because giving rights to some can often mean reducing those of others. But many human beings are treated unequally and denied their rights and opportunities.

Humanists wish to see improvements in laws to increase social justice and particularly to reduce the poverty that creates suffering even in prosperous societies. Some people do choose to be poor so that they can live a simple life free from the corruption of possessions, and many poor people live happy and rewarding lives. But most poor people have not chosen to be poor: it is the result of accidents of birth and the operation of economic forces that are beyond the control of individual people, and prevents them doing many things they would like to do for their families. So for Humanists poverty is not, as some religious people believe, ordained for some because of their individual failings, and the inequality it causes is not acceptable in a humane society. Humanists see this form of inequality as a sign of spiritual 'ill-being' in a society.

Because Humanists value human rights, they recognise that those who enjoy them have a responsibility to help extend them to others. This means recognising that the way we live may be contributing to other people’s lack of rights without our realising it, so we have a responsibility to be aware of the full consequences for other people of what we do. For Humanists in the richer parts of the world this means recognising our responsibility for much of the poverty and associated suffering in other parts of the world (see Perspective 8).

There are many possible case studies in this field, but one very relevant one at the present time is the use or misuse of recreational drugs that many see as a right,
whether their addiction is to tobacco, alcohol or banned substances. Humanists accept the right of free choice to smoke and drink, but stress the potential dangers of addiction because it can destroy happiness. They think the evidence is that making the use of recreational drugs illegal creates crime and that only the most harmful should be banned. But it is more important that everyone, especially young people, should be fully informed about the consequences of taking any drug, and this is another example of the Humanist concern for informed choice and relevant social education for future citizens.

Suggested teaching and learning activities

Discuss with students this quotation on suffering from David Attenborough. ‘I think of a parasitic worm that is boring through the eye of a boy living in West Africa, a worm that’s going to make him blind. Are you telling me that the God you say is an all-merciful God, that cares for each of us individually, are you saying that God created this worm that can live in no other way than in an innocent child’s eyeball? Because that doesn’t seem to me to coincide with a God that’s full of mercy’.

Design a poster to represent the Humanist view on suffering.

** Explore with students some issues connected with suffering, for example why some people suffer more than others, why bad things happen to good people, why if God is merciful and all-powerful, s/he allows suffering, and whether suffering is of any value.
** Explore with students examples of what Humanist attempts to reduce suffering religious believers would support, and which some might strongly oppose.
** Ask students to research the Buddhist view of suffering (overcoming suffering by learning from it), and compare this with the Humanist view.

** Class debate: ‘God on trial: the maker of a suffering world?’

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Explore with students why many people are poor (include economic factors like unemployment and low pay) and whether it is fair to be paid low wages for a useful job.

Role-play a family discussion about whether the mother should take a part time, low paid job to help out the family finances.

Act as ‘teacher in role’ to answer questions as a single mother who is having to decide whether to take a low paid part-time job or manage to bring up her family on state benefits.

Explore with students how young people whose parents are well off get better opportunities than others, whether this is fair, how this could be altered by laws, and why this change would be strongly opposed by some.

Explore with students the principle of the Nineteenth Century English Humanist philosopher Jeremy Bentham that laws should promote ‘the greatest happiness of
the greatest number’, and whether we have any laws that need to be changed for that purpose.

Group work: research the views of different world faiths on wealth and poverty (eg Islamic duty of ‘zakat’, the teaching of Jesus, the monastic discipline practised in most faiths, and the Hindu concept of ‘darma’).

**Class debate:
‘There has to be a limit on inequality in a healthy society’
‘Excessive wealth can never be justified’
‘The minimum wage should be raised to become a living wage’

Ask the students in groups to research the work for human rights of a Humanist such as Tom Paine, Annie Besant, Marie Stopes or Nelson Mandela. Explore with students the rights these people worked for, the people they felt responsible for, and the reason why religious groups opposed their work for equal rights.

** Explore with students the different views of religious believers and Humanists on where human rights come from, and why many religious people in different faiths believe that all those who have different beliefs are less equal than them.

** Explore with students what religious reasons have been and are being used to oppose some human rights, and why some religious and cultural traditions oppose what we in Britain see as the rights of women to equal freedoms and responsibilities.

Explore with students the problems that addiction can lead to, perhaps asking them if they would accept (a) a cigarette (b) a drink (c) a classified drug if it was offered to them, and at what age they feel young people should be informed in school about the dangers of taking any drugs.

** Class debate:
‘Informing people about the dangers of taking drugs only makes them more attractive’.
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 8

CITIZENSHIP AND DIVERSITY

Humanists value human diversity, all the characteristics that make human beings unique and valuable, and therefore welcome the opportunity to benefit from living in a diverse society with many different ways of life. However some tension in relationships exists because while almost all the non-indigenous cultures in Britain have strong religious identities, Humanists are non-religious and live secular life styles.

This tension in Humanist relationships with faith groups is reflected in the misunderstandings of religious minorities felt by other faith groups and by many in our largely secular society. Misunderstandings of our Muslim communities have been deliberately developed into Islamophobia and expressions of religious hatred. Humanists oppose Islamophobia, exactly as they condemn the religious fundamentalism to which most faiths are prone. They assert the rights of others to their beliefs so long as they do not harm others, and therefore uphold the British tradition of tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

In this spirit, Humanist respect for the rights of others means that they oppose racism, sexism and any other form of discrimination that damages people’s life chances through speech or action. Discrimination is unacceptable to Humanists because it offends every important principle of Humanism. It regards groups of people as inferior, devalues them as individuals, attempts to 'justify' exploitation, encourages intolerance, assumes conflict as a norm and creates suffering and unhappiness. So Humanists work, especially through education, to question the stereotypes and reduce the prejudices that underlie discrimination.

But Humanists also recognise that the rights of different groups can conflict, as can work against different forms of discrimination. Work for the rights of women can mean conflict with religious systems that are dominated by men. Therefore much sensitivity and skill is needed in policy-making and discussions to avoid or at least minimise feelings of injustice.

Suggested teaching and learning activities

Explore freedom of speech with students, using the British Humanist Associations’ Teaching Toolkit 5, video clip ‘Is freedom of speech important?’ that stresses the need to be free to speak our minds, even if this causes offence. You might ask students in groups to write short speeches and present the case for and against the exercise of this important (and Humanist) principle.

Explore with students whether people should feel free to say what they like about others, what effect this treatment has on those who are on the receiving end, why many people acquiesce in this, and whether Humanists would agree with this.
**Class debate:**
‘Comedians should be free to make fun of other people’s beliefs, even if this causes offence’.

Explore whether freedom of speech extends to expressing hatred of religion and Islamophobia, and whether this is racism in the ‘respectable’ guise of religious criticism.

Explore with students the Islamophobic accusations made about Muslims, what feelings this generates among Muslims and others, and whether it is an accurate view of Islam.

A valuable activity could be to ask students to explore the religious diversity in their own community (and if this is largely Christian, perhaps also in a contrasting multi-faith one). Students might have the opportunity to talk with religious leaders about the values they believe in, and compare these between the communities if appropriate, and in any case with what they know about Humanist values.

Ask students to design a poster that identifies and challenges Islamophobia.

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Explore with students the concepts of prejudice (pre-judgement) and stereotyping (preferably using an example from which no one in the group suffers) to explore how they would feel if treated in this way. Show how prejudice and stereotyping devalue people and make them vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation, and explore the values that lead Humanists to oppose all forms of discrimination. This could link with work on bullying and wider discussion of racism and sexism.

**With older students it might be appropriate to explore the effectiveness of laws in changing attitudes to discrimination (successful with racism, less so with religious prejudice and sexism), and how education can challenge and undermine discrimination.
HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE 9

GLOBAL ISSUES

Humanism is a global morality because its concern is with the well-being of humanity. This is not just an idealistic theory, because we are all more and more interdependent as globalisation continues. Humanists therefore think of themselves as ‘global citizens’ with global responsibilities.

All of us are now aware that the developments of industry and technology from which many of us have benefited in terms of better health, greater wealth and comfort have come as a result of the exploitation of finite resources and at the cost of a great deal of pollution. A rapid growth in world population and the wish of all to share in the benefits has led to damaging climate change. Humanists accept that human activity has been a major cause of this damage, even if only in making natural calamities worse than they might have been. They also recognise that this global situation involves important moral issues.

In terms of happiness and suffering, the benefits have been enjoyed by those whose societies developed industry and technology while the human costs have been borne by those who provide the resources. For Humanists this means that world poverty is not unavoidable and can be tackled – but only if we have a new ethical awareness based on a concern for humanity as a whole. Humanists as well as others need to re-think happiness, and go beyond the pursuit of wealth and possessions that has created endless desires for material things that have become ‘needs’. Perhaps these desires, and the profits that are gained by fulfilling them, are the real causes of environmental damage. Humanists have an important contribution to make in replacing short-term thinking by greater concern for long-term needs and the rights of future generations.

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Humanists also believe that if we have been responsible for the damage, we are also responsible for putting things right - or at least mitigating their effects - by changing our values and our behaviour. We should work in all possible ways to alleviate poverty and tackle disease and promote education. This interestingly brings Humanists into significant disagreement with some views of powerful religious organisations.

For example, papal authority forbids Catholics to use condoms - even though their use lessens the chances of contracting HIV and AIDS, and makes possible the birth control that is arguably the only way to reduce the pressure of increasing population on resources.

Also, while Humanists recognise their shared concerns of those working with and for Christian Aid and CAFOD to meet the needs of those suffering poverty and malnutrition, they oppose the efforts made by these organisations to educate (or indoctrinate) those they assist into their beliefs. Humanists support instead the work
of the secular organisations of the United Nations and other secular non-governmental organisations. There are also a small number of Humanist schools established in Africa with support from Humanists in this and other European countries.

A connected aspect of global awareness and human welfare is conflict, which is increasing as societies dispute and fight over shortages of resources like water and oil. Humanists have always worked for peace because war creates immense suffering and unhappiness. Humanists have supported campaigning organisations like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the work of the United Nations Organisation, to ‘counter violence with toleration and might with moderation’ (Kofi Annan). Humanists also deeply regret that clashes of religious belief have been and continue to be an additional cause of conflict, war and persecution, as religious authorities emphasise differences rather than similarities between beliefs.

**Suggested teaching and learning activities**

Introduce students to the environmental costs of pollution and climate change, explore the human costs involved and the responsibility human beings have for what is happening. This could be linked to work done in Key Stage 2 History on industrialisation and urbanisation in Victorian England.

A useful activity would be to selects some items in the family shopping, note where they have come from, make this information into a class map and calculate the miles or kilometres that these goods have travelled to get to us. Explore the likely cost, and whether there are local alternatives.

Explore with students the key concerns of Humanists that lead them to believe that climate change is a moral issue for us all in terms of our responsibilities to others, what changes are needed to reduce environmental damage and modify climate change, and whether we can realistically achieve this.

Then explore with students how a religious believer could reply to the following Humanist arguments:
- necessary action to tackle climate change is being delayed by the belief of many that God has ordained inequality
- the Roman Catholic ban on birth control measures makes environmental damage worse by promoting further increases in population.

Design posters to alert people to the dangers of climate change, and persuade everyone to make a contribution.

** Explore with students why Humanists believe that poverty can only be tackled by changes in the ways we trade, not just by charity or work for development. Explore what we would have to give up if these changes were made, and whether we would be prepared to accept them.
**Then explore with students how a religious believer could reply to the following Humanist arguments:
- aid and assistance for economic development is necessary but not sufficient to tackle poverty
- the work of religious organisations against world poverty should not be used as an opportunity to convert those they assist
- poverty is not ‘ordained’ or natural or deserved
- experiencing avoidable suffering is not beneficial
- we should not have to wait for improvement and happiness until an afterlife.

A useful activity here would be to find out what percentage of the cost of foods those who produce it are paid, and how Fair trade organisations give some of the profits back to the producers. Explore with students why it is a good idea for us to buy Fair trade products, and how this fits with Humanist and many religious values. This would link RE well with work in geography or economics.

Group work could include:
- researching the work against world poverty of (a) a non-religious organisation such as Oxfam or a United Nations organisation (b) a religious organisation such as Christian Aid or CAFOD, and listing similarities and differences between them.
- what work they might choose to do in a ‘gap year’ to reduce poverty, and what sort of organisation they would choose to work with.

** Class debates:
‘Changes in trade are even more important than aid in tackling world poverty’
‘Helping poor people should not be used as an opportunity to make them religious.’

Explore with students what beliefs of Humanists make health and avoiding illness a very important priority, and how religious believers would reply to Humanist arguments that the restrictions some religious authorities place on medical treatment like blood transfusions or preventative practices like the use of condoms are in fact immoral.

Use the British Humanist Association’s Teaching Toolkit 5 video *clip ‘Is it ever right to use violence?’* where Humanists discuss some of the dilemmas as a starter for exploration of issues of conflict.

Explore with students the issue of religion as a cause of conflict. This could start with the issue of Islamophobia in this country and Europe generally, the views of Christian fundamentalists burning the Koran or those imams who preach the virtue of hatred of other religions and terrorist attacks. The Humanist concern for peace and commitment to reduce conflict would provide an opportunity and an objective setting for study of the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity, and how religious people can work together and with others to reduce the causes of conflict between the two faiths as part of multi-faith education.
General issues for exploration would include whether we can hold to our beliefs without conflicting with others, whether we sometimes need to fight to uphold our beliefs, whether it is ever right to use violence, and whether pacifism is an adequate answer to aggression.

Group work could take this issue further by asking students to research examples of conflict between religions such as the Crusades that form the background to much of the present day conflict between Islam and Christianity. This would tie in well with a historical study of the Crusades.

**Class debates:**
‘Are we really experiencing ‘a clash of civilisations’ based on religious differences between Islam and Christianity?’
‘There would be much less conflict in the world if religions adopted Humanist perspectives.’

(This topic could be used as an aspect of the work of the school against bullying, and provide an opportunity for students to discuss the importance of this, what responsibilities they would have if they observe bullying, and how they could act to defuse a conflict situation or help a victim.)
Many atheist Humanists are very critical of religion as superstition and delusion. However, many agnostic Humanists appreciate that religious belief can be of real value to individuals both in terms of their feelings and their purposes in life. These Humanists value the fact that Britain is a multi-cultural society made up of many faith groups, and support each community’s right to maintain and practice their beliefs and ways of life. Even more important, they recognise and share the many human values that underpin the main religions. They see these as the basis for a dialogue with faith groups and between the faith groups themselves.

But all Humanists find themselves in deep disagreement with religious believers about many of the ways that organised religion uses its power. As democrats, Humanists condemn the urge within many religions to convert and indoctrinate. They oppose fundamentalist thinking and the authoritarian and sometimes violent behaviour to which that leads. They reject the power that organised religion has to influence law making in many societies including our own. They reject the notion in some religions that suffering is pre-ordained. In all these ways, Humanists believe that these aspects of religion do not respect the rights of others. However, on the same grounds Humanists are pleased to see the progress made in the Anglican Church in ordaining women priests and the (slower) progress towards acceptance of gay members of the clergy. These are developments that Humanists would seek to encourage in dialogue.

As explained in Perspective 8 above, Humanists are particularly concerned about the conflicts and misunderstandings created by different religious faiths in the past and the present day. These conflicting viewpoints lead to inter-communal violence, sponsorship of terrorism, civil war and often, in theocracies led by religious authorities, full scale warfare.

So Humanists believe that inter-faith dialogue is essential to peace because it could lead to greater understanding and tolerance. Humanists believe that religious groups should explore the similarities between them and accept their differences. To promote this, Humanists seek a dialogue with faiths to help moderate the unforgiving aspects that emerge from concentration on religious differences, and to encourage the dialogue between faiths that seeks out the similarities in belief and behaviour that unites them as humane philosophies.
Suggested teaching and learning activities

Ask students in groups to list the similarities and differences between the last two religious belief systems that they have studied.

Explore with students ways in which Humanism is different to religious thinking, and things that Humanism and religious thinking might be said to have in common.

** Class debate ‘Some religious traditions have more in common with Humanism than with other religious traditions.’

** Arrange and possibly video-record a discussion between representatives of different faiths or different traditions in a world faith from the local Inter-faith Forum, joined by a Humanist, about their agreements and disagreements. This could lead to a discussion or class debate about what Humanists can contribute to a dialogue between faiths.

** With older students this discussion or debate could be focussed on a particular theme where disagreement would be almost certain, at least from the Humanist perspective, for example the ordination of women priests or of gay bishops.

Explore with students whether the criticism from humanists that religions cause war and conflict is valid, and how they would reply to it.

** With older students this could form the basis of a class debate.

** Use a controversial statement that shows strong disagreement between religions, or between some religious believers and humanists, such as ‘women are unfit to become priests’ and explore with students whether there is any way in which they could begin to reduce or resolve the differences.

Robin Grinter 2011