



It is vital that children are taught humanism's answers to life's 'ultimate questions', says Andrew Copson

The announcement that students on the OCR exam board's GCSE religious studies course will now study humanism is good news for balanced and objective education. But it is not just that the inclusion of humanism as a non-religious world-view is to be welcomed in itself; it is also significant in that the move – and the media's reaction to it – implies the acceptance of humanist beliefs and values as representing a coherent stance on life, with its own integrity. In 2004, by contrast, when the first government national framework

for religious education (RE) recommended the study of humanism, there were headlines such as “Children to study atheism at school” (the Observer) and “Schools are told to teach atheism” (the Sun). This focus on one aspect of the humanist world-view (its view on the non-existence of gods), and the general portrayal of humanist beliefs as just a reaction to or critique of religion, obscures the richness and depth of both the humanist outlook as a modern life stance and of the millennia-old humanist tradition. Four years later, it is encouraging to see acceptance of the independent existence of the humanist outlook (by OCR at least – other exam boards have not yet been so inclusive).

The noun “humanism”, as it is used by humanist organisations around the world today (and when it appears in RE), denotes a set of beliefs and values that characterise a world-view very widely shared by many people in modern Britain, and it is a mistake to define their beliefs purely negatively, by reference to what they don't believe in (gods, ghosts, life after death and so on). It is true of course that humanists do not believe in these things, but the reason they do not believe in them is much more important. Humanists believe that the reality we perceive around us – the world and

universe that we make sense of through experience – is the only reality we can know and that there is no “second layer” to reality in which gods, demons or the “supernatural” can exist. It is this conviction that also leads humanists to believe that this life is the only life we have and that morality as we understand it is a natural product of our social instincts and not handed to humanity by some external divine source. Together with the belief that the aim of morality should be human welfare and fulfilment and that, in the absence of ultimate “purpose” to the universe, we make meaning for ourselves, both individually and in community, these convictions form the basics of the stance on life described as humanism today.

When we have a curriculum subject such as RE that aims to increase children's understanding of all the different beliefs and values people live by today and to allow all children to reflect on and find their own answers to the

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“ultimate questions” in life, it is easy to see why the inclusion of humanism is essential. So large a number of people share humanist beliefs that any discussion of the world-views of modern Britons would be incomplete were it not to include them, offering pupils from religious backgrounds the opportunity to learn about values and opinions they may not encounter elsewhere and pupils from non-religious backgrounds the opportunity to give a name to beliefs with which they are already familiar. OCR itself said the move was prompted by the fact that humanist beliefs are “held by increasing numbers of citizens”.

Most of all, when it comes to those “ultimate questions” that form the backbone of RE syllabuses, such as beliefs about truth, authority, meaning, purpose, ethics and morality, it is vital that pupils learn about the answers given by humanists: that the basis of knowledge is reason, evidence and experience; that morality comes from our own selves as social beings; that happiness, meaning and fulfilment are our own to create through the joy of intellectual endeavour, of social action, of human relationships.

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