

Voices from Humanist Worldview Traditions

Over the last few years we have collated responses to questions about religion and worldviews from different perspectives. This resource provides personal answers to questions from lived experience and were written directly by believers.

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1. What does it mean to be a Humanist? Do you believe that God exists and why? How do you believe the world was created?

I would say that humanism is not a religion but a worldview, in other words a way of seeing the world. Humanists do not believe that god, or anything supernatural, exists. We rely on science to make sense of the world we are living in, and since there is no scientific evidence for god, we have no reason to believe that god exists.

That said, humanists respect the views of others, and understand that some people have their own, personal reasons for their belief in god.

For me, humanism is a great description of how I see the world, and allows me to explain myself using positive language. Rather than just saying I'm 'non-religious', being a humanist expresses the beliefs I do hold; that we can still live morally good lives without the need for a god telling us how to behave, we can work together to make the world a better place, we can treat all human beings as equal, and treat animals and the planet with respect, and that we should value things like freedom, justice and happiness.

Since I am a humanist I don't think that the earth or life was created by god(s) or goddess(es). Humanist generally think that science is the best way of explaining how we got here and why.

A lot of people don't think there is enough evidence to say that the universe is here because "god created it".

The short answer is that I believe that the universe started in a "Big Bang" which you may have heard about - Scientists don't yet know everything about it, but they think that this is a best explanation for all the available evidence.

The evidence suggests that the universe is very old - the current estimate is 13.8 billion years old! . Astronomers estimate the age of the universe in two ways: 1) by looking for the oldest stars; and 2) by measuring the rate of expansion of the universe and working back to the Big Bang.

And when it comes to life on earth, then I think that the best explanation for how we got here is by evolution. You may have heard about the theory that animals adapt and change to their environment, and the ones that do it well are best able to survive, and the traits that help them to survive are passed on to their children and the more this happens the more pronounced the thing that helps them survive becomes.

Good examples of this are how we have selectively bred plants to grow bigger fruit, or else how dog breeders have bred pedigree dogs that have really pronounced features (like pugs with their squished-up faces).

I guess what I am trying to say is that we are here because the conditions allowed for it. It was a natural process that took millions of years, and that I don't think that a supernatural being was involved.

Some people don't like to think that the only reason we are here is because of a series of accidents, but for me I think it is incredible! And that we can use science to learn more about the universe is wonderful.

2. What are Humanist views on the roles of women and how do you battle with sexism?

Humanism is about seeing and understanding the world as a natural phenomenon (i.e. not supernatural), using our experiences and our thinking to come to conclusions (which could be described as the scientific method). There is no humanist 'authority' - no one special book or figurehead which is seen the source of rules for life. What is common in most humanists' beliefs is not seeing enough evidence for the existence of a god... therefore tending to be either atheist or agnostic. As a humanist, I believe that we have this one life only, that when we die, there isn't another life to go to.

Humanism is a worldview rather than a religion but what connects it with religion is that it can be described as a set of beliefs and values - one of the main values being that we should make the most of this one precious life we have, and this means being kind to ourselves and to others, especially those who are vulnerable or not able to help themselves.

Beginning to understand what Humanism is, can sometimes be a bit more difficult than beginning to learn about a religion - mainly as there is no one 'right way'. There are a lot of disagreements amongst humanists, for example. There isn't a humanist equivalent of a church or synagogue etc. There is no one place that all humanists in the area will meet up. Some may choose to meet up in local humanist groups in a cafe or hire a room out. There are Sunday Assemblies which some non-religious people choose to go to so that they can have that sense of community that some religious people might feel.

What I'm trying to say is those who identify as humanists are a big range of people. If every single one of them were to stick to the core humanist values of being kind, treating people equally, then sexism in humanists wouldn't exist. So, I'm pretty sure there wouldn't be any specific humanist groups that would meet up and separate out the men and women into different rooms, for example. I definitely can't think of any hierarchy within a humanist organisation where men would be given a leading role and women wouldn't even be allowed to apply for the role!

BUT, as a woman, I know that sexism is deeply ingrained in our society, whether its citizens are religious, humanist or whatever label they choose. I, personally, have encountered sexism by men (including some who call themselves humanists). But, thankfully, this is not the norm in the humanist circles that I mix with - and their sexism goes against humanist values.

One of the main forms of sexism that I have encountered is being patronised, it being assumed that I am there to learn from men (despite having 20 years' experience of teaching!) As I have become older, I have learnt not to 'people-please' so much and I have found that me being assertive can be seen by some men (and women!) as me being 'bossy' or 'aggressive'. I am learning to be comfortable in having strong opinions (not fixed ones, I'm always open to hearing other viewpoints) and I reject the patriarchal view that having strong opinions as a woman means that I am trying to be domineering. I think that women can be brought up to be subservient, in whatever group they belong to (or not).

I spent the last twenty years working in education, a career where female voices have been strong for a long time. It has been a shock moving into an arena where that isn't the case but with the support of allies (of whatever gender), I'm making a conscious effort to make sure my voice is heard!

3. What is the difference between Humanism & Atheism? Who founded Humanism?

Atheism is a word that describes a lack of belief in gods and goddesses. Humanism is much more a positive set of beliefs. A humanist is generally an atheist or agnostic. But humanists also have a set of other beliefs about how we should treat others, how the world came to be and how we can best understand the world around us.

Humanists generally think the world is a material place - there is no supernatural side, that science is the best way we have of understanding the world, and that we can and lead ethical and fulfilling lives.

No one founded it, really, because Humanism isn't a doctrine that sets out hard a fast rules that you have to follow to be a humanist - it is more a collection of beliefs and values that have developed over time about the world around us and how to live the best possible life, and these have developed over a long, long time. For example, humanists believe that this is the one life we have - that we (most likely) won't go to heaven or hell, or be reincarnated or live on somewhere else after our deaths. This is because the available evidence tends to suggest that when we die and our brain stops working then that is the end of the person that is 'us' and when our body has decayed that is the end of the physical thing that is 'us' - there is no real evidence for a soul. You might want to watch this video about death <http://youtu.be/pR7e0fmfXGw> to get a better understanding.

Of course, the name 'humanism' hasn't been around as long as some of the ideas that make up a humanist perspective about the world. Confucius in China said that 'we should repay injury with justice, and kindness with kindness' - that is a pretty humanist way to think. And in ancient Rome there were philosophers who didn't believe in the gods, or who thought about what it means to live a good life without referring to religion.

Modern day Humanism is a little different to what the term would have meant in the past. Some people might call themselves religious humanists - which is to say they are religious people that have a concern for humans and support human rights, but this is very different to the modern understanding of humanism. The modern definition is very much about using science and reason to best understand how the universe works a belief in the big bang over creation, for example), a materialistic view of the world (it is a natural place, rather than a supernatural place - there is no second layer to reality), and that we can - and should - live a good life and help others to do the same.

4. What do you think of life after death?

I think that there is no evidence for life after death. I don't believe that I will be reincarnated, or that when I die, I will go to another place where people are rewarded or punished. Humanists, and many non-religious people, believe that this is the one life we have.

I have a materialist view of the world. This means that I don't believe in the supernatural, or that there is some second layer to reality, but believe the world is made up of natural things, and although science can't yet explain everything I think that science is the best way of understanding the world around us. The reason I don't believe in an afterlife is that there is considerable evidence that links conscious life to brain activity. We have no good reason to believe that, once the brain is destroyed, there can be any form of consciousness for that individual – and, indeed, once the body has disintegrated, there is no form of life at all for that individual. The destruction of the brain and the body means complete annihilation for the individual.

I get asked a lot of this though makes me unhappy, or if it makes me sad that I will not see my family and friends again in an after life. But for me, I find joy in the the relationships and past-times I am experiencing in the here and now, rather than sorrow at not having them in some mythical time in the future after death.

This is not a new concept. Greek and Roman philosophers had similar thoughts on death thousands of years ago. For example, Lucretius (c95-55BCE) in *On the Nature of the Universe* said

"Be sure then that you have nothing to fear in death. Someone who no longer exists cannot suffer, or differ in any way from someone who has not been born." and there is an Epicurean epitaph from 2300 years ago, which is inscribed on the gravestones of Epicurus's followers and seen on many ancient gravestones of the Roman Empire that says: "I was not - I have been - I am not - I do not mind."

5. What is the purpose of life?

I guess there are three parts to this question: (a) What is the purpose of life in general (and I guess I'd have to consider what we mean by 'life' - intelligent life, for example, or anything that could be described as life - with the caveat that many people like chemists, biologists and astronomers all have a different view on what life is at its most basic)? (b) what is the purpose of human life? and (c) what is the purpose of my life in particular?

For me, I don't think there is any purpose of life itself. As a humanist I think that science is probably the best way we have of understanding the world, and that means I am pretty sure the universe is very old, that it started with a Big Bang, that life started for no real reason, and that we evolved on earth because the conditions allowed for it. So, why did this happen? And what was there before it? Who knows, but there doesn't always have to be a reason for everything...

But if life has no purpose - no reason to start and keep going - that doesn't mean that I think human life has no purpose, although I don't know what that purpose would be either. Is the purpose of the human race to help each other to thrive? I wish I could say yes, and maybe it is, but what then? We thrive, we flourish, perhaps we keep evolving into a new species?

I guess the most valuable answer I might give is about the purpose of my life. But I don't think there is one. However there is no reason not to go on living it just because I'm not sure if there is a purpose to it. I like to think there are many purposes to my life rather than just one overriding one. I hope to live 'a good life'. But as A.C. Grayling says, there is no one 'good life'. There are as many good lives as there are people to live them.

If you would like to follow this up, you might like to watch this video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvz0mmF6NW4>

I also highly recommend this lecture by AC Grayling about Humanism. His books are as good as any about the meaning and purpose of life, but his lectures are brilliant: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LyTc7Vh8zo>
I also recommend *The Young Atheist's Handbook* – one was sent to every school library in the UK – by Alom Shaha: <http://alomshaha.com/yah-home/>

6. How might living in modern Britain help or hinder the way you practice Humanism?

The main thing that I would like to get across is how much I appreciate being free to talk about my non-religious belief in the country where I live. At our local humanists' group, one of our members who attends regularly is an asylum seeker from Iran. He came to live in this country as he could be put to death in his own country for being an atheist. Our group also supported another asylum seeker from Afghanistan whose family was murdered by the Taliban and his government want to have him killed. (I have seen the translation of the official government letter saying this. It was truly heart-breaking to read.) There are currently 13 countries where being an atheist is punishable by death. (Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates).
<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/the-13-countries-where-being-an-atheist-is-punishable-by-death-a6960561.html>

So, I *truly* appreciate the fact that I am free to have and to talk about my non-religious beliefs.

I also *fully* support that people of all faiths should have this freedom too. This means that I am a secularist. Some people get this word confused and think it means being non-religious - this is incorrect. Secularism is about making sure that religion isn't involved in how the country is run; secularism is just a framework for making sure people are treated equally in politics, education, the law and in other areas – for believers and non-believers alike. <https://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html>

I work as a humanist weddings and namings celebrant and can carry out this job without being in fear for my life or getting hassled for what I do. The couples and families I work with can celebrate a commitment to their relationship or the birth of a child in a joyful way that reflects their non-religious beliefs. I LOVE my job! Living in modern Britain means I can do this job and my couples are free to have humanist wedding ceremonies.

Another thing about modern Britain is that Religious Education lessons are concerned with giving young people the chance to learn about religions and non-religious worldviews - and I get invited into the classroom to talk about my beliefs. I get to role model being someone who is non-religious AND a good, thoughtful person who stops to think about how amazing this world is, how lucky I am to be alive and how I want to make the most of my one life for myself and for others. In schools, I get the chance to break down any misconceptions that people need a religious belief to be good and thoughtful. (Obviously, I know that people with both religious and non-religious beliefs can be good and thoughtful! I have many friends who are religious and get on with them well - we have shared values of compassion, empathy, gratitude and charity, for example.)

After having talked about the freedoms I have as a humanist living in modern Britain, I also want to talk about how I am hindered by my non-religious beliefs.

I have said that I am a secularist (ie. I don't think anyone should have unfair privileges because of their beliefs). Modern Britain is NOT a secularist society, however: there are many ways that I do not have the same rights or privileges as a Christian, for example. I am not in an equal position in relation to my rights.

Laws:

In the House of Lords, there are 26 Church of England bishops involved in the law-making in this country. No other religion or belief system is represented. (See the image in the link below). In my opinion, that means that the Church of England has an unfair advantage in saying what laws get made in Britain. I don't think it is right or fair that they should have a seat in the House of Lords.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Lords

Marriage:

In England and Wales at the moment, any couples who book me as their wedding celebrant have to go to the register office to become officially married, then have their personal wedding ceremony with me and all their family and friends. In Scotland and Northern Ireland (and many other countries), humanist marriages are legal, so couples don't need to go to the register office to get officially married - as soon as a Scottish humanist celebrant signs the wedding certificate, that's it, that's the moment the couple become legally married!

You might be thinking - what's wrong with having to go to the register office? Nothing, of course - but registrars work differently to celebrants and have to stick to quite a simple ceremony, without much chance for it being very personal. My ceremonies are ALL about the couple - if they want me to tell the story of how they met, I can do that; if they want to choose a few readings that are personal to them, they can do this; if they want to sing 'It Must Be Love' by Madness, they can do that... even if a couple want to perform a circus act as part of their wedding ceremony, they can do that too! <https://news.sky.com/story/calls-grow-to-legalise-humanist-ceremonies-in-britain-10687312>

So, if a couple want to choose a humanist wedding where they can have a ceremony that is personal to them, it can't be their legal ceremony (compared to Church of England Christian or Jewish couples). So humanist couples are hindered by not being able to have a legal wedding that is personal to them. And, as a wedding celebrant, I am hindered: in Scotland, for example, numbers of couples choosing to have humanist weddings have soared since they became legal.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/17/humanist-weddings-scotland-england-wales>

7. As a Humanist, do you celebrate Human Rights Day? If so, how do you celebrate it?

As a humanist, human rights are very important to me and I push for equality in a number of areas, including mental health in the workplace, equality within the wedding industry (I'm a wedding celebrant) and fair treatment for asylum seekers fleeing countries where their lives are in danger due to their non-religious beliefs. I feel the need to do this as an individual, as part of Liverpool Humanists and as a humanist wedding celebrant. I don't personally feel the need to celebrate it on one day in particular.

One of the difficult parts about teaching Humanism is that it doesn't tend to lend itself to topics such as Festivals, Artefacts, Stories, places of worship etc. One way of doing this is to look at how non-religious people may still celebrate festivals from a cultural perspective, e.g. Christmas and Easter.

There is a lot of cultural practice within religious traditions and I believe it's impossible to separate out the two from each other. So, for example - I grew up in this country where Christian culture is dominant - so I celebrate Christmas. I love Christmas! I enjoy that special feeling in the build up to the holiday, spending time with family and making the house look festive. BUT... I don't celebrate it in the same way as a practicing Christian would: I don't go to church, I don't have a belief in Jesus as the son of God, it's not a holy time for me. For me, it's about the connections with other people who celebrate Christmas too (for whatever reason).

8. As a Humanist how do you make sure you live an ethical life? What is a humanist's main rule?

In fact, one of the things that got me interested in Humanism was ethics. Many religious people have a clear value system set out in religious texts and so on. As a non-believer I felt I really identified with the value system of Humanism; that without the need for a higher authority I could make ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals.

I know that I am to be held accountable for the decisions I make in life, and I try to make good decisions. When trying to work out what a good decision is, I try to factor in the effect on my actions on others.

For example, I have recently chosen to be a vegetarian. Whilst this is not by any means a pre-requisite of being a Humanist, I came to realise that consuming too much meat is not good for the planet, and intensive farming methods can be harmful to the animals reared. Both things I wish to see reduced. Other Humanists may act or feel differently, but probably all would want to promote welfare and reduce the suffering of animals. This might inspire them to act in a variety of ways, for example choosing free range or organic meat produce, donating to an animal welfare charity, being a responsible pet owner and so on.

Ethics is not just an individual matter. By opening discussing and debating ethical issues, we can come to communal decisions about laws and policies that benefit all.

Main rule? - This is tough because Humanism isn't a doctrine that sets out hard fast rules that you have to follow to be a humanist - it is more a collection of beliefs and values that have developed over time about the world around us and how to live the best possible life, and these have developed over a long, long time. For example, humanists believe that this is the one life we have - that we (most likely) won't go to heaven or hell or be reincarnated or live on somewhere else after our deaths. This is because the available evidence tends to suggest that when we die and our brain stops working then that is the end of the person that is 'us' and when our body has decayed that is the end of the physical thing that is 'us' - there is no real evidence for a soul. You might want to watch this video about death <http://youtu.be/pR7e0fmfXGw> to get a better understanding.

Of course, the name 'humanism' hasn't been around as long as some of the ideas that make up a humanist perspective about the world. Confucius in China said that 'we should repay injury with justice, and kindness with kindness' - that is a pretty humanist way to think. And in ancient Rome there were philosophers who didn't believe in the gods, or who thought about what it means to live a good life without referring to religion.

Modern day Humanism is a little different to what the term would have meant in the past. Some people might call themselves religious humanists - which is to say they are religious people that have a concern for humans and support human rights, but this is very different to the modern understanding of humanism. The modern definition is very much about using science and reason to best understand how the universe works (a belief in the big bang over creation, for example), a materialistic view of the world (it is a natural place, rather than a supernatural place - there is no second layer to reality), and that we can - and should - live a good life and help others to do the same.

9. What happens at a Humanist wedding and a Humanist funeral?

There are no laws around humanist weddings - so anything you like can happen. But people generally follow a fairly traditional format. There is a lot of symbolism and meaning in the things that happen in weddings.

As a wedding celebrant, I could talk all day about humanist weddings! I have just conducted two in the last week and each was beautiful.

A humanist wedding allows the couple to be the centre of the ceremony, not god. The entire ceremony is written from scratch around the couple and what they mean to each other. This means the weddings are very personal, often emotional, and are full of meaning.

Many non-religious couples say they don't want their marriage to start with a lie, and they feel it would if they had to say vows in church about a god they didn't believe in.

Humanist weddings are not yet legally recognised in England and Wales (they are in Scotland), so couples have to attend a register office to complete paperwork to make their marriage legal. We hope this will change in the coming years.

Funeral - Humanists ceremonies are non-religious and focus on the life the person has lived. The format is usually much the same as other funerals, but there won't be any religion in it, or if there is it won't be led by a humanist. You might want to watch this video about death to understand what humanists think about death: <https://youtu.be/pR7e0fmfXGw>

10. Like a religion does the association have any guidelines like in a religion you may have 'Do Not Kill' or do humanists take rules from the public.

Because Humanism isn't a doctrine that sets out hard fast rules that you have to follow to be a humanist - it is more a collection of beliefs and values that have developed over time about the world around us and how to live the best possible life, and these have developed over a long, long time. For example, humanists believe that this is the one life we have - that we (most likely) won't go to heaven or hell or be reincarnated or live on somewhere else after our deaths. This is because the available evidence tends to suggest that when we die and our brain stops working then that is the end of the person that is 'us' and when our body has decayed that is the end of the physical thing that is 'us' - there is no real evidence for a soul. You might want to watch this video about death <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR7e0fmfXGw&feature=youtu.be> to get a better understanding.

Knowledge can come from a lot of different places, and because humans are pretty rational (most of the time!) they can work things out for themselves.

Humanists believe that the world is a natural place - that there is no supernatural part to it - and that means that we might not understand everything about it yet, but that science can give us the best explanations to how the universe operates and where it all came from. Humanists generally are a little bit sceptical when it comes to the ideas that that best answer is that 'God did it'. For example, if God made the universe then where did God come from? Or else, if God came out of nowhere or nothing or doesn't need a start point, why is it so hard to think that maybe the universe started from nothing? The next step might be to think that if the big bang is true and the universe had a starting point then how can we find evidence to support this? Why is there

something rather than nothing? You might want to have a read of this if you like physics...
<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141106-why-does-everything-exist-at-all>

Science is helpful, but it doesn't help us when we think about how we should behave and how we should treat others. Humanists use their own reason, experience and judgement about how we should treat others or to work out what it means to live a 'good life'. One of my favourite humanists, AC Grayling, discussed this in a lecture I was at when he was talking about how we should treat others - he said the golden rule: 'treat others how you would like to be treated yourself' but then added that you might do that but they might not like it! Instead, perhaps we should treat others how they would like to be treated - which also might be difficult because it might go against our own beliefs and values. It is hard to make a rule like that we can all follow all the time in every circumstance - we need to use our reason, experience and knowledge to make these sorts of decisions. Luckily, because humanism isn't a doctrine that has to be followed, or a set of commandments that must be obeyed, we can make decisions for ourselves. When people have asked me why, if I don't believe I will be punished when I do, would I not steal and cheat and lie and murder... I guess my answer for that is that I wouldn't like to live in a society like that. I also get very worried when people ask this question because it suggests that the only reason they don't do these things is because their religion tells them to.