

NON-RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE AND THE WORLD

SUPPORT MATERIALS - GMGY

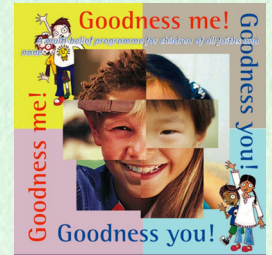
People express non-religious philosophies of life and the world in different ways. For children in your class who express a non-religious worldview or belief, it is important that the child's parents or guardians are the primary sources of information about that child's beliefs.

WHAT IS A NON-RELIGIOUS BELIEF?

People who define themselves as not having a religious belief describe themselves in various ways. These variations reflect some differences in meaning and emphasis. It is important to recognise that a person who does not hold a religious belief will have many beliefs. However, their beliefs are not associated with a religious tradition. This support material aims to offer insight into some non-religious philosophies of life and the world.

WHAT IS ATHEISM?

Boghossian (2013) notes that the term 'atheist' is contentious. In his book, he argues that none is "more problematic, more contentious, more divisive, or more confusing than the term 'atheist'. Atheism is not an affirmative belief that there is no god nor does it answer any other question about what a person believes. It is simply a rejection of the assertion that there are gods. Atheism is too often defined incorrectly as a belief system.



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VARITIES OF ATHEISM

Atheism is often divided into two schools of thought; strong atheism and weak atheism. The strong atheist denies the existence of God or any other deities. This person's views are based solely on what can be found to be true using the scientific method. Since the existence of God cannot be proven using science, the strong atheist concludes that God doesn't exist.

The second type of atheism is weak atheism. This person does not deny the existence of God outright, but rather claims a religious relativism. That is, they would claim that anyone's belief can be true for that person, but they don't believe in God themselves.

Strong and weak atheism are distinct from the categories of implicit and explicit atheism, also relating to whether an individual holds a specific view that gods do not exist. Strong explicit atheists assert that it is false that any deities exist. Weak explicit atheists assert they do not believe any deities exist but do not assert it is true that no deity exists.

All implicit atheists are included in the weak atheism categorisation. Those who do not believe any deities exist, but do not assert such non-belief, are included among implicit atheists who include: children and adults who have never heard of deities; people who have heard of deities but have never given the idea any considerable thought; and those agnostics who suspend belief about deities, but do not reject such belief.



Richard Dawkins (2016) in his book 'The God Delusion', describes people for whom the probability of the existence of God is between "very high" and "very low" as "agnostic" and reserves the term "strong atheist" for those who claim to know there is no God. Dawkins proposes a spectrum between the two extremes of opposite certainty, which can be represented by seven "milestones". He suggests definitive statements summarise one's place along the spectrum of theistic probability. These milestones are:

1. **Strong theist:** 100% probability of God. "I do not believe, I know."
2. **De facto theist:** Very high probability but short of 100%. "I don't know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there."
3. **Leaning towards theism:** Higher than 50% but not very high. "I am very uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God."
4. **Completely impartial:** Exactly 50%. "God's existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable."
5. **Leaning towards atheism:** Lower than 50% but not very low. "I do not know whether God exists, but I'm inclined to be sceptical."
6. **De facto atheist:** Very low probability, but short of zero. "I don't know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there."
7. **Strong atheist:** "I know there is no God, with conviction."

The only common thread that ties all atheists together is that they do not believe in gods.

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WHAT IS AGNOSTICISM?

Agnosticism is the absence of knowledge of gods. Agnosticism, strictly taken, means not claiming to know for sure if any gods exist. A person who has an agnostic belief believes that nothing is known, or can possibly be known, about God or supernatural phenomena, and that it is wrong of people to claim otherwise.

If a person cannot claim to know, or at least know for sure, if any gods exist, then they may properly use the term “agnostic” to describe themselves; at the same time, this person likely insists that it would be wrong on some level to claim that gods either definitely do or definitely don't exist.

Confusion about agnosticism commonly arises when people assume that “agnosticism” actually just means that a person is undecided about whether or not a god exists. This is not the case.

Agnostic musings and ideas can be traced back to the earliest Greek philosophers and have even played a role in western theology. The first person to use the word “agnostic” was Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley described agnosticism as a method rather than a creed and even today some use “agnostic” to describe how they approach issues rather than as a position or conclusion.

WHAT IS A SECULARIST?

‘Secularists’ believe that laws and public institutions (for example, the education system) should be neutral as between alternative religions and beliefs. Almost all non-religious people are secularists, but religious believers may also take a secularist position which calls for freedom of belief, including the right to change belief and not to believe. Secularists seek to ensure that persons and organisations are neither privileged nor disadvantaged by virtue of their religion or lack of it. They believe secular laws, those that apply to all citizens, should be the product of a democratic process, and should not be determined, or unduly influenced, by religious traditions. The word ‘secularism’ was once used to describe a non-religious worldview generally but this meaning is now out-dated.

WHAT IS HUMANISM?

The term ‘humanist’ describes a person who seeks to live a good life without religious or supernatural beliefs. In addition, humanists believe that moral values follow on from human nature and experience in some way. Humanists base their moral principles on reason, on shared human values and respect for others. They believe that people should work together to improve the quality of life for all and make it more equitable. Humanism is a ‘life-philosophy’ or worldview.

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In 1952, at the first World Humanist Congress, a statement of the fundamental principles of modern Humanism was agreed upon. It was called it 'The Amsterdam Declaration'. At the 50th anniversary of the World Humanist Congress in 2002, again meeting in the Netherlands, they unanimously passed a resolution updating that declaration and calling it 'The Amsterdam Declaration 2002'. Following the Congress, this updated declaration was adopted unanimously by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) General Assembly, and thus became the official defining statement of World Humanism.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

- **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and concern for others, needing no external sanction.
- **Humanism is rational.** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means, but human values must propose the ends.

- **Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
- **Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world.
- **Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents.** It is thus committed to an education free from indoctrination. Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
- **Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognises the transforming power of art.** Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.

Humanism is a life-stance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times.

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ARE THERE ANY ORGANISATIONS IN IRELAND WHICH PROMOTE NON-RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE AND THE WORLD?

[The Humanist Association of Ireland](#) and [Atheist Ireland](#) are two examples of organisations which promote non-religious philosophies of life and the world.

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