

Non-Religious Worldview Traditions Core Knowledge Essay



This core subject knowledge essay is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying in-depth subject knowledge essay and glossary, available both on our website and for download.

In-depth subject knowledge essay: reonline.org.uk/religion-worldview/non-religious-worldview-traditions/table-of-contents/

Core subject knowledge essay: reonline.org.uk/religion-worldview/non-religious-worldview-traditions/core-knowledge/

Glossary: reonline.org.uk/glossary/?religion_worldview=non-religious-worldview-traditions

Contents

Introduction	1
History and origins	1
Core beliefs	1
Practices and rituals	2
Diversity within non-religious Worldviews	2
Key figures and symbols	2
Sources of authority	3
Festivals and special days	3
Statistics in Britain	3
Key takeaways	3

Introduction

Non-religious worldviews are diverse ways of making sense of life without reference to the teachings of religious traditions. This diversity means there is no single set of teachings, leaders, or sacred texts, but rather a wide variety of approaches to understanding life, morality, and meaning. Many people with non-religious worldviews identify as atheist, agnostic, humanist, or simply non-religious.

Some non-religious people emphasise the importance of reason, the scientific method, and a naturalistic understanding of the universe. Others find meaning in philosophy, ethics, or values such as empathy and autonomy. Together, people who hold these worldviews represent one of the fastest-growing identity groups in Britain today.

History and origins

Non-religious worldviews have always existed, but the Enlightenment in 17th and 18th century Europe gave rise to rationalist and sceptic traditions that challenged religious authority. Thinkers like David Hume, René Descartes, and Baruch Spinoza shaped ideas of empiricism, consequentialism, and utilitarianism.

The publication of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution in 1859 was a landmark moment, offering a naturalistic explanation of life's diversity. In the 20th century, philosophies like existentialism, pragmatism, relativism, and even nihilism influenced non-religious thought, stressing human responsibility, context, and meaning.

Core beliefs

Non-religious people hold a wide range of beliefs, but many share some common themes:

- The One Life: the conviction that this is the only life we have, with no afterlife.
- The good life: placing value on the search for happiness, purpose, and meaning in this life.
- Humanist morality: the view that decisions are based on reason, evidence, and concern for people and other sentient beings.
- The Golden Rule: a moral imperative to treat others as you would like to be treated.

Humanism is the most organised and visible non-religious worldview within the United Kingdom. Many are guided by Humanism, a life-stance based on reason, empathy, and human welfare. The symbol of the Happy Human represents this outlook internationally, and organisations such as Humanists UK provide support, education, and celebrants for life events.

Other approaches include Sentientism, which extends moral concern to all beings capable of experience.

However, it should not be assumed that those who are non-religious are anti-religious. For example, in a 2022 survey*, 36% of non-religious people say, 'all religions have some element of truth in them' and, whilst 39% of non-religious people agree with the statement, 'religion has no place in the modern world,' another 33% disagree with that statement.

*Hannah Waite: The nones: who are they and what do they believe? (Theos 2022)

Practices and rituals

Although non-religious people do not share common rituals in the same way religious groups do, many still mark important life events. Celebrants can lead weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals with personal and meaningful content.

Day-to-day practices often focus on living ethically: considering the consequences of actions, consequentialism, seeking the greatest good for the greatest number, utilitarianism, or following personal integrity. Some also engage in practices like meditation or mindfulness as part of being spiritual but not religious (SBNR).

Diversity within non-religious Worldviews

The non-religious population is far from uniform. It includes:

- Atheists, who believe there is no god/s.
- Agnostics, who believe we do not or cannot know whether there is a god or gods.
- Humanists, who are guided and inspired by the achievements of humanity, and live by reason, compassion, and science. Most Humanists are also atheists.
- Sceptics and realists, who doubt untested claims and trust scientific descriptions of reality.
- People who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), who may value a spiritual dimension to life without belonging to a religion.
- Philosophical influences are varied too, from existentialism and pragmatism to postmodernism, which questions whether religion still plays a central role in society.

Key figures and symbols

- Charles Darwin: whose Theory of Evolution transformed scientific understanding.
- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill: key thinkers in utilitarianism.
- William James: associated with pragmatism.
- George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans): female author and free thinker.
- The Happy Human: the main symbol of Humanism worldwide.

Sources of authority

For the non-religious there is no sacred text, leader or source of authority. Individual non-religious people will seek and find wisdom in a variety of different people, places and writings. Non-religious people often look to the scientific method, reason and empathy and the golden rule to help them decide what is right and how to make decisions.

Festivals and special days

Non-religious worldviews do not have holy days or festivals in the religious sense. However, many traditionally religious ceremonies have been adapted to reflect alternative worldviews, with festivals like Christmas widely practiced by non-religious people, modified to focus on children and the welfare of humans rather than the birth of Jesus. Some people choose to celebrate events that reflect their values explicitly. For example, many mark Darwin Day (12th February), celebrating science and the Theory of Evolution, or World Humanist Day (21st June), which highlights the values of Humanism. These occasions are opportunities to reflect on reason, empathy, and the good life in the one life we have.

Contemporary expressions

Non-religious worldviews today influence politics, education, and public life. Non-religious people have played an important role in secularist campaigns, arguing for separating religion from state institutions, ensuring that people of all faiths and none are treated equally although it should be noted that many religious people agree with this separation. Campaigns often focus on human rights, social justice, and freedom of belief.

Philosophical traditions continue to evolve, with some embracing relativism (truth depends on context), others stressing realism (science tells us what reality is like), and newer outlooks like Sentientism, which extends empathy to animals and artificial intelligences.

Statistics in Britain

The 2021 census for England and Wales recorded that 37% of the population identified as having “No religion.” In Scotland’s 2022 census, 51.1% said that they had no religion. This makes the non-religious group the largest worldview group in Scotland and one of the largest in England and Wales.

Key takeaways

- Non-religious worldviews are diverse, including atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and many others.
- Common values include human welfare, reason, empathy, and a focus on the good life in the one life we have.

- Influenced by philosophies from utilitarianism to existentialism, non-religious traditions stress responsibility and autonomy.
- Organisations such as Humanists UK support education, ceremonies, campaigning and advocacy.
- The non-religious is now one of the most common worldview identities in Britain.