

## Death and the Afterlife



**Mother and daughter**

Mother and daughter visiting grave;  
Blend Images / Alamy Stock Photo

**"It is not rational arguments but emotions that cause belief in a future life."**

Bertrand Russell, Atheist Philosopher  
*Why I Am Not a Christian*, 1957.

**Explain the statement above.**

**To what extent do you agree with the statement?**

### What do Humanists believe happens to us when we die?

The vast majority of secular Humanists believe in annihilation. This means that when a person dies, their life has come to a complete finish; apart from their physical remains, they have ceased to exist. The belief that we have just this one life, that we are living now, and no other, is summed up in the British Humanist Association slogan: 'for the one life we have'. This stands in stark contrast with most religious teachings, which state that the soul moves on to another life after physical death. For instance, the Christian belief in Heaven and Hell, or the Hindu belief in reincarnation.

Religious people will almost always argue strongly against the belief in annihilation, as for them, it would mean that life lacks the ultimate purpose beyond this life, promised by their sacred texts, such as the Bible or the Qur'an. For religious people, believing in an afterlife, which most often involves judgement, and thereby reward or retribution for one's actions in this life, gives meaning and purpose to life and motivates people to live morally good lives. If you don't believe in a life after this one, what's the point in living? What can be your ultimate goal? And, if you are not going to be held to account for the way you've lived your life, why not just do as you please, regardless of how it impacts on others? Let's explore some Humanist perspectives on these really important questions.

### Why don't Humanists believe in an afterlife?

Humanists base their views on reason and evidence. There is a considerable amount of scientific evidence that conscious life is linked to brain activity. Due to this, Humanists would argue that there is no good reason to believe that, once the brain is destroyed or stops functioning, there can be any form of conscious life or experience for that person. People may genuinely think that they have had glimpses of the afterlife, in the form of near death experiences, but these can be explained scientifically, in terms of what happens when the brain and respiratory system are shutting down, close to death, and the body is deprived of oxygen. So, in the absence of any convincing evidence for an afterlife and strong evidence that people are unable to experience anything at all without a functioning brain, most Humanists conclude that life ends at the physical death of an individual.

Humanists do not look to religious texts and teachings for answers. Although the majority of religious teachings indicate that there will be some form of life for human beings after death, there are numerous and often conflicting accounts of what form such existence beyond this life will take. For Humanists, this is all merely speculation, without proper evidence. The purpose of these various religious teachings on the afterlife, from a Humanist perspective, tends to be that they give comfort to people

that death is not the end, and they motivate people to live good lives for fear of divine punishment and eagerness to be rewarded for good actions. Both purposes are well-intentioned, and undoubtedly beneficial to many people, but this does not make the afterlife a reality, and so the vast majority of Humanists do not believe in an afterlife.

### **Isn't that depressing? Doesn't that mean that life has no purpose and that Humanists are immoral people?**

Many people find the idea of annihilation harsh, bleak and even depressing. Certainly, even some people who do not believe in God and even some of those who identify themselves as Humanists, may still believe that there is some form of existence for us after we die, but these people are a minority. Many people will find it comforting to think that they will be re-united with deceased loved ones after their own death and to believe that people they have lost still continue to live, but in another form or in another realm. Often we see good people suffering and bad people going from strength to strength and not being punished for their wrongdoings. It is not fair, and so it is immensely reassuring to believe that this will all be made right by a God who rewards and punishes people according to the lives they have led, if not in this life then the next.

Concluding that there is no life after death, as most Humanists do, means giving up these comforting beliefs! A Humanist, however, would argue that, far from being depressing, the prospect of annihilation is enormously liberating and inspiring! As Humanists believe there is no divine punishment, reward or compensation for suffering in another life beyond this one, this makes it even more urgent to ensure that suffering and pain are minimised in this life and that that fairness and justice prevail in this world. If a person does not have justice, freedom and happiness in this life, they never will! Consequently, lots of Humanists would regard the religious attitude of tolerating suffering in this life, in the hope that it will be rewarded or compensated for in the next life, as hugely problematic and very immoral.

Humanists live without the fear of eternal punishment from a higher being for their wrongdoings. This doesn't mean that they believe they can do whatever they want! As already mentioned, the lack of another life after this one, makes striving for justice in this life a central concern for Humanists. However, they do not rely on religious teachings and commandments; instead, Humanists believe in making moral choices through reason and empathy, carefully considering the possible consequences of their words and actions on others, themselves and the world around them. The majority of sacred texts convey very similar codes of morality, for instance not lying, not stealing or murdering, respecting your parents, and so on. For Humanists, this is not evidence of God, but instead it shows that human beings the world over recognise that we need to behave in certain ways to avoid clashing with other human beings. So whilst sacred writings have been helpful in constructing codes to live by, Humanists see these as expressing the codes of morality and kinship that is hardwired into all human beings, to enable us to live as social animals, not as the rules laid down by a higher being.

We have now have sophisticated laws and legal systems that keep us in check, and Humanists strongly believe that we no longer need the idea of divine retribution (that is, punishment from God or gods). Obviously, Humanists (like everyone) will do immoral things from time to time, but they believe that their conscience<sup>1</sup>, and reference to past experience will serve as guidance for them to decide what is right or wrong and make better future decisions, should they behave in ways that are not good for them or others. And, of course, if their actions are unlawful, they could be punished through the legal system, not by God.

To sum up, for Humanists the purpose of life is to make the most out of the one life we know we have - this life - not selfishly, but to make this life happier, more just and as free from suffering as possible. So, actively doing good in the world is of central importance to Humanism, but a Humanist will decide what is a good action not by reference to sacred writings or the teachings and examples of religious

figures, but through empathy and reason. They will not be motivated to do good in order to obtain some ultimate divine reward in the next life or good favour from God in this life, but will do good primarily for the sake of making life a little (or a lot) better for others. Many Humanists take care of the environment and help those in need. Indeed, there are various Humanist groups which have been established to do so, such as **Humanists for a Better World** (H4BW). Some Humanists even claim that because these good works are motivated by a desire to make the world a better place, and are freely undertaken not for reward or to avoid punishment, they are actually morally superior to similar actions for religious believers who have these interests of ultimate reward or punishment in mind.

### Actually, Humanists DO believe in a sort of afterlife...

Whilst Humanists do not believe in an afterlife where the individual continues to live on in another form, they believe that people's 'afterlife' can be understood as their impact left on others, their communities and even the world, after they have died. A person can 'live on' in the memories of others and the effects of their actions may continue long after they have died.

## Activities

- 1) Explain, with examples, what a religious believer means by 'afterlife'.
- 2) Explain what is meant by annihilation.
- 3) Explain why, for a Humanist, the idea of annihilation can be seen as positive.
- 4) In what way may a Humanist be understood to believe in some sort of afterlife?
- 5) "There is no such thing as life after death."

Discuss this statement, showing that you have considered more than one point of view. (You must refer to religious and non-religious beliefs, such as those held by Humanists and Atheists, in your answer).

### 6) THINKING SKILLS GROUP CHALLENGE

Work as a pair or a small group to plan a funeral service for a Humanist. What form might the service take? How would it differ from a religious service? Where would it be held and who would lead the service? How could the service reflect the person's beliefs and give comfort to the person's friends and relatives.

<sup>1</sup> Whereas religious people often view the conscience as God's inner guidance, a Humanist will usually think of it as a biologically hardwired sense of right and wrong which enables us to function as social beings.

IMAGE REFERENCE: <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-caucasian-mother-and-daughter-visiting-grave-in-cemetery-75679982.html>