

HUMANISM

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‘Humanism’: two meanings—broad and narrow

The broad meaning of ‘humanism’ covers any view of the world (*Weltanschauung*) in which human concerns and human capacities tend to take priority over other-worldly, supernatural, mystical, irrational and magical views. Thus ethics is not justified ultimately by appeal to supernatural revelation, miracles or sacred texts. This is obviously vague but it will do for a start. Humanism in this sense can be traced back to classical thinkers in India (Buddha), China (Confucius), some ancient Greek philosophers, some classical Islamic thinkers (Averroes), a few medieval Christians such as William of Ockham, and renaissance figures such as Erasmus, Leonardo and Thomas More. Most of these were not atheists or agnostics. This use of the term is common in anthropology and the history of ideas.

Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is a more recent development (mainly 19th century and later) and comprises a broad range of views which combine humanism in the first sense with a generally negative attitude to faith, religion, and other supposed supernatural sources of knowledge. Humanists in this narrow sense (which we shall use from now on) tend to be freethinkers, agnostics or atheists. Early modern representatives include Thomas Hobbes and David Hume. The 19th century saw famous representatives such as Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Charles Bradlaugh (the first atheist MP) and Thomas Henry Huxley (biologist who invented the term ‘agnostic’). Famous 20th century humanists include Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre and a large number of other scientists, philosophers, politicians and journalists. The term ‘humanism’ is preferred over other negative terms such as ‘atheism’ and ‘agnosticism’ because it is positive. Being a humanist does not imply (as some religions do) an instrumental or dismissive attitude to non-human creatures (Peter Singer is a humanist).

In the early 20th century as the numbers of people turning away from organised religion grew, various groups sprang up to represent the views of non-religious citizens in matters of public life. In Britain these included the National Secular Society, the Rationalist (Press) Association and the South Place Ethical Society. After the horrors of World War II a number of humanist groups met in Amsterdam to press for an international

organisation, the International Humanist and Ethical Union. They issue the Amsterdam Declaration in 1952. This was superseded by a modernised version in 2002. This is printed below.

The major British humanist organisation, the British Humanist Association (BHA) was founded in 1963. It was the successor of the Union of Ethical Societies founded in 1896. I joined the BHA in about 1965; my membership lapsed in 1968 when I went to University. Since 1999 I have belonged to the Humanist Philosophers' Group, an advisory body that meets regularly in London (for this reason I do not get there too often). I have not rejoined the BHA. The HPG advised the BHA on matters of policy, considers the foundations of civil society from a humanist point of view, and produces occasional documents for the BHA, such as *What is Humanism?* (2002) and *The Case for Secularism: a neutral state in an open society* (2007).

Humanism is generally

- positive (taking the view that it is an intellectual advance to step beyond religion)
- optimistic (about people's general benevolence or will to do good and their ability to be convinced to do so)
- rationalistic (believing the principles of right action and the good life can be worked out by us unaided)
- supports human rights (believes that there are certain things it is always morally inadmissible to do to people, e.g. torture, and that these rights should be protected)
- supports personal autonomy (believe that all mature fully functioning human beings should choose their own way to live, and give their own meaning to their life, and not have it dictated by others)
- egalitarian (believing that all human beings have equal intrinsic value)
- democratic (believing that democratic institutions at all levels are the best guarantor of rights and the good life)
- tolerant (believing that within limits, human beings have the right to live in ways of which others, even a majority, disapprove)
- secularist (believing that public institutions should not give special privileges to religious groups, beyond securing their freedom from oppression or discrimination)

Some Questions for Discussion

Are humanist organisations necessary?

Would you consider joining a humanist organisation? Why (not)?

Is it possible to be both religious and humanist?

Do we need secular ceremonies such as the "rites of passage" for which the BHA provides celebrants and officiants?

In the light of the horrendous atrocities perpetrated by human beings in the last century, is humanism's optimistic rationalism unrealistic?

Can children be brought up as humanists? Should they?

Can humanism stem the tide of secular moral relativism?

Could it be justified to tell false stories for the sake of public order and morality?

Many of those who stood out against totalitarian regimes in e.g. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Poland etc. had strong religious beliefs. Is humanism too weak a position to afford that kind of resistance?

If humans are the biggest danger to the planet, is it wrong to support humanism instead of say the Green movement?

Discuss a current topic such as: faith schools; Shariah law; the BBC charter; bishops in the House of Lords.

Amsterdam Declaration 2002 □ □

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

1. ***Humanism is ethical.*** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the 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 a concern for others, needing no external sanction. □
2. ***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. □
3. ***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. □
4. ***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 education free from indoctrination. □

5. ***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. □
6. ***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. □
7. ***Humanism is a lifestance 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. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour.

Some Online Resources

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/>

<http://www.iheu.org/>