

WHAT IS HUMANISM?

The "Happy Human",
the international symbol of Humanism



The short version

Humanism is an ethical approach to life without religion. Humanists think we can be good without God.

The longer version

"The rejection of religion in favour of the advancement of humanity by its own efforts." (Collins Concise Dictionary)

"... seeking, without religion, the best in, and for human beings." (Chambers Pocket Dictionary)

"... an appeal to reason in contrast to revelation or religious authority as a means of finding out about the natural world and destiny of man, and also giving a grounding for morality... Humanist ethics is also distinguished by placing the end of moral action in the welfare of humanity rather than in fulfilling the will of God." (Oxford Companion to Philosophy)

A recent Ipsos MORI poll (November 2006) indicated that about 17 million people in the UK are broadly Humanist in their outlook – that's about 36% of the population. They:

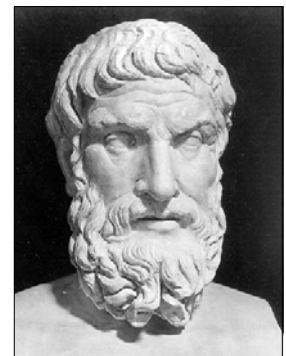
- feel scientific & other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe (rather than feeling that religious beliefs are needed for a "complete understanding")
- believe that "right and wrong" can be explained by human nature alone, and does not necessarily require religious teachings, and
- base their judgments of right and wrong on "the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world".

Unlike religionists, Humanists have no faith. Having "faith" means having a strong belief in something without proof. Humanists are essentially sceptics. Where religious people might offer supernatural answers to some of the fundamental questions about life, the universe, and everything, we prefer to leave a question mark. Humanists are atheist (meaning "without god"), or agnostic (a term coined by the 19th century biologist, Thomas Henry Huxley, to mean "without knowledge", since Huxley said one cannot prove or disprove the existence of God).

Humanists reject the notion of an afterlife; we think that this life is the only one we have, and we must make the most of it.

Humanists don't have the equivalent of the Bible or the Qur'an, or a book of rules to guide us through life, though we may refer to great works of history, philosophy and literature. You don't actually need to have read the history of Humanist ideas to be a Humanist, but most, being inquisitive, thoughtful people, will investigate the ideas that interest us.

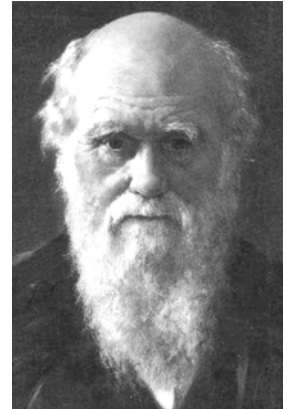
We can trace Humanist influences over 2,500 years to the Chinese sage Confucius and to the philosophers, scientists and poets of antiquity. One was the Greek philosopher **Epicurus**,



who, starting from Aristotle's principle that human happiness depends on good conduct, defined the good life as one of pleasure and friendship, absence of pain and peace of mind. His disciples included women and slaves, which was almost unheard of at that time. Epicurus said, "Of all the means by which wisdom ensures happiness throughout life, by far the most important is the possession of friendship."

For centuries, it was unsafe to express unorthodox views about religion, but with the dawn of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, it gradually became possible to do so, with caution. Some described themselves as “rationalists”, “secularists” or “freethinkers”, terms that are still used by Humanists today.

Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution made a huge impact on our understanding of where we come from, has been a strong influence on Humanism. The scientist Marie Curie, the 18th century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, the authors Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the American creator of the Star Trek TV series, Gene Roddenberry, are just a few of the influential people who’ve lived by Humanist principles.



Current distinguished supporters of the British Humanist Association include: Baroness Blackstone, Professor Sir Bernard Crick, Maureen Duffy, Rt Hon Michael Foot, Professor A C Grayling, Rt Hon The Lord Hattersley, Dr James Hemming, Professor Steve Jones, Anish Kapoor, Sir Ludovic Kennedy, Glenys Kinnock MEP, Stewart Lee, Ian McEwan, Jonathan Meades, Sir Jonathan Miller CBE, Warren Mitchell, Terry Pratchett OBE, Philip Pullman CBE, Claire Rayner OBE, Professor Steven Rose, Salman Rushdie, Laurie Taylor, Polly Toynbee (BHA President), and Professor Lewis Wolpert CBE FRS. There is a cross-party Parliamentary Humanist Group.



Professor Richard Dawkins FRS, a tireless advocate of secularism and Humanism, said, “I arrived at my beliefs, as everybody should, by examining evidence.” Many Humanists have worked out their own beliefs and are delighted to find that others have reached similar conclusions. Because we are independent thinkers, Humanists differ about many things, but most of us agree about some basic principles. We believe that we should accept responsibility for our own behaviour and how it affects other people and the world we live in. Because we think that this is the only life we have, we believe it’s important to try to live full and happy lives, and to help others to do the same.

Humanists were involved with the establishment of the United Nations; we value human rights, freedom of communication, freedom from fear, want and suffering, and education free from bias and the influence of powerful religious or political organisations.

In his book “Humanism, an introduction” (Rationalist Association), Jim Herrick wrote, “Humanism is the most human philosophy of life. Its emphasis is on the human, the here-and-now, the humane. It is not a religion and has no formal creed, though humanists have beliefs. Humanists are atheists or agnostics and do not expect an afterlife. It is essential to humanism that it brings values and meaning into life.”

For more information, see:

The British Humanist Association – www.humanism.org.uk, The National Secular Society – www.secularism.org.uk, Suffolk Humanists – www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk, The International Humanist & Ethical Union – www.iheu.org, New Humanist Magazine, published by the Rationalist Association – www.newhumanist.org.uk.