



A teacher's guide to Humanism

Name	Humanism is not a religion; it is a non-religious, ethical worldview to support living a positive life. Humanism is concerned with many of the same concepts as religions, but generally derived from secular ideas and considerations that have affected and influenced the lives of people, particularly since the Enlightenment. https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/
Followers are called	Humanists – there are in the region of 150 million active adherents, which is about 2% of the world's population.
Founder	None - although it can be said that it started formally with Greek philosophers (Aristotle is normally quoted)
When founded?	Humanism is a worldwide phenomenon although it is most often associated with the post-Christian trends of the 20th century in Europe and the developed nations.
Holy/Special book/s	There are no holy books. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • However, there is a basic principle that underlies morality. It is known as 'the Golden Rule' and seems to be universal to all the traditions – religious and philosophical. 'Treat other people in the way you would like to be treated yourself' or 'Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself'
Holy/Special building/s	New York Society for Ethical Culture building is a particularly renowned building
Main Symbol	<p>https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/the-happy-human-symbol/</p>   <p>There is no great range of symbols unique to Humanism and none of any great age. The best known is perhaps the "Happy Human" symbol. This was the winning design in a competition in the 1960s and has been adopted and adapted by humanist organisations all around the world. It was chosen for its happy appearance, happiness and humanity being central concepts to humanists, and for its H-shape, standing for Humanism. The slightly higher arm on the left was intended to hold different national flags.</p> <p>Humanists are people who shape their own lives in the here and now, because they believe it's the only life they have. Humanists make sense of the world through logic, reason, and evidence, and always seek to treat those around them with warmth, understanding, and respect.</p>

Beliefs about God
Throughout recorded history, there have been non-religious people who have believed that this life is the only life they have; that the universe is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side, and that people can live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. They trust the scientific method, evidence, and reason to discover truths about the universe and have placed human welfare and happiness at the centre of ethical decision making.

Today, people who share these beliefs and values are called humanists and this combination of attitudes is called Humanism.

The most important humanist beliefs are that that people can live good lives without religion or a belief in any god, and that people can know what is good by using reason, experience and empathy with others, not by reference to religious rules and traditions. Most people who call themselves humanists:

- do not believe in any gods: they may be agnostic or atheist;
- believe that people understand the world and what is true through experience and reason;
- believe that people, whatever their backgrounds, have much in common. They believe that many, perhaps most, of our moral values are shared, because they are based on shared human nature and needs, and what works best when people have to live together.

Beliefs about the world including creation

Humanists think that the answers to questions such as ‘What is the purpose of life?’ or ‘How did we get here?’ do not come from a god’s opinions or thoughts. They think answers come from human thought and reflections upon what humans have come to understand about the world/universe. As more is discovered about the human mind and about the universe, more ideas will be gained regarding the origin of life. Currently they understand that our universe started with the Big Bang 14.5 billion years ago, our planet came into being over 3 billion years ago and life started about 350 million years ago.

Beliefs about the Afterlife

- Humanists believe that this life is all there is – there is no afterlife. Therefore, the rewards and punishments for the way people live their lives are here and now; so they should make the best use they can of their lives.
- Humanists do not believe in any kind of supernaturally inspired end to human existence, or in the possibility of surviving death.
- If humanists find any meaning in death, it will be in reflecting on a life well lived and on transience: as Marcus Aurelius put it in his Meditations (121 – 80 CE), “Nature’s law is that everything changes and passes, so that, in due course, other things may come to exist.”
- The main difference between the humanist attitude to death and that of most religious believers is in the absence of belief in life after death. The only way humans can possibly live on, humanists believe, is in the achievements and memories and children left behind – an extra incentive to live a good life. Belief in death’s finality is not necessarily gloomy: “Death is nothing to us: for after our bodies have been dissolved by death they are without sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us,” said Epicurus, in “Principal Doctrines”, c.300 BCE, and most humanists agree.

Other key beliefs

- That anyone can live a good life: both those who are religious and those who have no religious beliefs.
- That no human being is less or more worthy of life than any other.
- That all can enjoy and benefit from the best things that other human beings have invented, thought about and made.
- We should care for all species on our planet and care for our planet
- We should use reason and ethics to discover how our world works

- That there are many enjoyable and useful ways to improve the world. Sometimes this needs careful, logical thought (reason); sometimes ‘hunches’ (intuition); sometimes feelings for others (empathy).
- It is not necessarily enough to try to be just a ‘happy individual’, better to think of ways that others (maybe everyone) can be happy, and act accordingly.
- Most humanists think it is wrong to take another person’s life, whether that is by murder or execution, and some humanists oppose all wars.
- Humanists think that government, law courts, schools and national ceremonies should be secular (with no religion involved). At the same time, humanists think there should be religious toleration. That is that people should be free to practice their religion as long as it doesn’t persecute or harm others. Humanists think it’s vital that every young person learns about the different religions that are common in the UK today, as well as humanism. We work to ensure that such education is critical, objective, and pluralistic.

Important stories

There are no key stories in Humanism, and no sacred stories. However, as human beings enjoy and learn from stories, both true ones and fiction, and so stories of various kinds are important to humanists. Though they distinguish carefully between truth and fiction, humanists find psychological and moral truths in both. (Darwin, who wrote the *Origins of Species*, is a good way of introducing children to how Humanists understand people to have evolved from bacteria.)

How should we treat others?

See ‘Golden Rule’

Humanists believe that people should be treated with respect and interest. They know that knowledge comes from asking questions and being curious and therefore feel it is important that we co-operate with others to further our knowledge of how the world came into being, how we can physically, as well as emotionally support others and, how we can care for other species on this planet and our planet.

Holy Buildings

There are no sacred places or places of pilgrimage for humanists. Some find inspiration in places of natural beauty or in museums or art galleries or places where inspirational figures lived or concert halls, locations which remind them of humankind’s place in nature or human creativity and culture.

Humanists today do not worship, as they do not believe in a deity to be worshipped. However, the 19th century forerunners of contemporary Humanism, Ethical Churches, were run like very liberal churches, with sermons, ministers and hymns, and the British Humanist Association has in its archives copies of the 1818 Ethical Church / Ethical Society hymn book “Social Worship”. Ethical Churches, later Ethical Societies, fulfilled a need for non-conformists and freethinkers to get together for an inspirational communal experience, usually on a Sunday when everyone else was at church. The focus was on doing good and inspirational ideas such as peace, liberty, justice, duty and courage. These were reflected in the language and format of meetings, though their roots in Christian services are evident, with references to God and Jesus alongside poems by Keats, Wordsworth and Tennyson set to music.

Later, Ethical Societies in the UK joined together as the Ethical Union, which in the 1950s became the British Humanist Association.

Humanists have very few buildings of their own in the UK. Two examples are Leicester Secular Society and Conway Hall in Holborn, London; both are large buildings with many rooms of various sizes suitable for meetings and lectures.

Leicester Secular Society's building is particularly interesting. Built in 1881, partly because of the difficulties atheists and freethinkers had in finding places to meet, its façade features busts of Socrates, Jesus, Voltaire, Thomas Paine and Robert Owen.

Conway Hall was opened in 1929 when the South Place Ethical Society needed a new home. The Society wanted "a dignified and commodious building, which it is hoped may become the Headquarters of the Ethical Movement in the British Isles, and also provide an open platform for speakers from any part of the world." Conway Hall remains a centre for free speech and progressive ideas. It holds a library of free-thought and hosts the world's longest running continuous series of chamber music concerts, which began as secular alternatives to church-going on Sundays. Ethical Societies still thrive in many cities in the USA, where there is also an Ethical Union based in New York, with a slogan "Deed before creed".

Humanists who choose to meet with other humanists today can do so freely. They meet in each other's homes or in public spaces such as libraries, meeting rooms or pubs. Their meetings vary according to the interests of the group but might include visiting speakers, discussions on ethical subjects, or planning social events or fund-raising for charities, but not worship or prayers. The meetings are important to their members as spaces where they can meet like minds and find support for their humanist worldview.

Places of pilgrimage

There are no sacred places of pilgrimage for humanists. Humanists feel awe and wonder – at the natural world, for example – and concern, joy and sadness just like other human beings. When it comes to praise and thanks, humanists would thank and praise other people for the good things in life, not a deity, and they do not worship.

Holy books

None – see above 'The Golden Rule'.

Also: **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 after the 2nd World War)** is underpinned by the belief that all human beings share the same basic needs and values and that all are entitled to the rights.

1. Altruism
2. Caring for the World around us
3. Critical thinking
4. Empathy
5. Ethical development
6. Global awareness
7. Human rights
8. Peace and social justice
9. Responsibility
10. Service and participation

Important people within the tradition

Current 'well known' humanists - Michael Rosen, Stephen Fry, Sandy Toksvig, Salman Rushdie
Historic figures include - Charles Darwin, Stephen Hawking, Isaac Asimov

Festivals

Darwin Day is 12 February every year. Humanists UK holds an annual Darwin Day Lecture and supports other events. They have a campaign to have Darwin Day recognised as a public holiday.

Charles Darwin was not only a great scientific thinker. He was fascinated by the relationship between human beings and other animals. He foresaw the false ideological evils for which natural selection might be used in justification and warned against such misunderstanding. He was also sensitive to the private and social upheaval that the theory of evolution would cause: revealing that human beings all belong to one common family and relating us to all other living things came at the cost of displacing humanity from the central, 'divine' position previously occupied. Despite his personal caution, Darwinism radically re-shaped human understanding about all living things, and today humanists all over the world can celebrate this as a defining moment in the naturalisation of human understanding of the world.

Rites of passage/important life events

Humanists believe that humans have one life: that we are born, we change from being children to being adults; all through our lives we have relationships, some which may wish to be celebrated. Some humans make babies, some don't, and we all die. These stages are 'rites of passage' and may be marked with ceremonies. They will be about the purpose of life because they celebrate important stages in anyone's life and to celebrate the person or people by showing/saying to everyone present that they are loved. For example:

- **A humanist wedding** is a non-religious ceremony that is conducted by a humanist celebrant. It differs from a civil wedding in that it is entirely hand-crafted and reflective of the humanist beliefs and values of the couple, conducted by a celebrant who shares their beliefs and values.

Weddings in UK, conducted by a humanist celebrant can be performed in any part of the UK or crown dependencies (Channel Islands and Isle of Man), but they don't come with legal recognition in England, Wales, Guernsey, or the Isle of Man.

Humanists believe this is discriminatory, because religious people have a choice between being married by a civil registrar or being married by a representative of their religion who shares their approach to life, but those wanting a humanist wedding also have to have a separate civil marriage in order to be legally married. This causes additional expense and an administrative burden that religious couples don't have to face, but more than that, couples often complain that the wedding ceremony they see as their 'real' marriage ceremony is not the one recognised in law as when they become legally married.

Important practices

Other important information

Key term glossary

Term	Definition
worldview	A worldview is the set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of Reality that ground and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing. One's worldview is also referred to as one's philosophy, philosophy of life, mindset, outlook on life, formula for life, ideology, faith, or even religion.
atheist	Someone who does not believe in any kind of god.
agnostic	Someone who thinks that the existence of a greater power, such as a god, cannot be proven or disproved, so they will not say for certain that a god does or does not exist. Humanists are atheists. Some atheists do not say that they are humanists because they do not want to give the impression that they believe all human beings are equally good.
Secularism	A description of how national institutions such as governments, hospitals, schools and national ceremonies can be run, without reference to any religion or god. Most humanists think that this is the best and most peaceful way for things to be run, so that people of one faith don't end up ruling over people of another faith or over those who have no religious belief.
Personal philosophy	Everyone has one. It is made up of your thoughts about things like 'What is right/wrong?; What is the best way to live your life.
Religious tolerance	That people should be free to practice their religion as long as it doesn't persecute or harm others

Useful Websites/Resources

<https://www.reonline.org.uk/subject-knowledge/humanism>

Twitter: @HumanismEdu

<https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/>

Resources for teachers: <https://humanism.org.uk/education/teachers/>

www.understandinghumanism.org.uk

<https://understandinghumanism.org.uk/films/?film=j0olfCVBC0&postID=1721> Films for various ages

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