

## What is humanism?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines humanism as “a rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.” Humanism can be described as a godless philosophy based on reason and compassion.

A more in-depth definition comes from the BHA (British Humanist Association): the word humanist has come to mean someone who

- trusts the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works, and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same

If this sounds like you, congratulations, you’re a humanist.



“Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.”

–Christopher Hitchens

“If lightning is the anger of the gods, the gods are concerned mostly with trees.”

–Lao Tse, sixth century BCE



### Curious? Contact us!



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Humanists, Atheists, and Agnostics of Manitoba



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## What is a Humanist?



Design credit: South Jersey Humanists

A Humanist is a **non-religious** person who believes that **this life is the only life we have**, that the **universe is a natural phenomenon** with no supernatural side, and that we can **live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity**. Humanists have trusted to the scientific method, evidence, and reason to discover truths about the universe and have placed **human welfare and happiness at the centre of their ethical decision making**.

– Adapted from the British Humanist Assoc.

## History of humanism

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Humanism is a fairly new name for a very old philosophy. The basic principles of humanism – skepticism of supernatural claims and an emphasis on living a fulfilling and ethical life without religion – have been embraced by a wide variety of thinkers in different cultures for thousands of years. But not until the twentieth century did the word “humanism” become the common term for this worldview.

Throughout history public expressions of humanist ideas have often been suppressed and destroyed, and, at other times, such ideas have probably been voiced only in private. Sometimes the strongest remaining indications of humanist thinking in a society are seen in the work of artists or in the arguments of apologists who are defending religious orthodoxy against the skeptics of the day. (An interesting example still quoted today is the Old Testament statement that “The fool hath said in his heart that there is no god” [Psalm 14]. This insult suggests that even in Bronze-age Jewish society, atheist thinking was prevalent enough to motivate religious teachers to attack it!)

Humanistic philosophy has a long history. Important humanist traditions include the great teachers and philosophical movements of Ancient China and India between two and three thousand years ago; the philosophies of classical Greece and Rome, which survived in the Muslim world during the European Dark Ages and Medieval period, finally returning to Europe in the Renaissance; and the flowering of scientific and humanist thought in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It is important to note humanism has no country or culture of origin, nor did it spring from any political view. Humanism is simply a product of us, the human animal, and our willingness to be honest with ourselves.

## Evolving views

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Humanism is an open-ended quest; it seeks to provide answers to life’s questions based on the best available knowledge and philosophy. But sometimes the best available knowledge still leaves a lot of unanswered questions. Humanist views are open to change and are constantly evolving. Humanists don’t expect a “one, final, absolute” truth to be revealed to them. On the contrary, they hold that all opinions are fallible and provisional, and that free inquiry and debate are essential to the process of learning and developing. Thus, humanists value tolerance, pluralism, and critical inquiry as positive and beneficial qualities in society.

The humanist reliance on science and common sense often means many people are humanists without realizing it! Hundreds of millions of people around the world agree with the humanist philosophy of living a happy and productive life based on reason and compassion. These tacit humanists reach similar conclusions without meeting like-minded people or reading particular texts. They work out their humanist life stance independently by learning what science has discovered, by examining supernatural claims, and by sharing in our universal human values.



HAAM supports a young student at the **Kasese Humanist Primary School** in Uganda, Africa. To contribute to his education, please donate to HAAM.

## What does humanism offer?

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Your beliefs inform your actions; that is to say, what you believe very much informs how you behave. Untrue beliefs often give us answers that are untrue. The result can be bad answers and behaviour, while the people engaged in this behaviour think they're doing the right thing for the right reasons. We all have an interest to make sure beliefs are true or as true as possible. Humanism offers a way to get to those truths.

Humanism offers a way to rid ourselves of attitudes that separate us, like the in-group out-group mentality of religion and politics. If we are to make the rules that govern us, we have to make sure that those rules apply equally to all people, not just those of a certain gender, religion, or creed. The rights of the individual are paramount; however, they must be tempered with empathy and compassion as well as a responsibility to each other. Humanism offers the realization that we have a responsibility to our natural environment as well as to our fellow humans who exist now and the ones who will exist in future generations. Humanism takes into account the bigger picture for the success of our species.

Humanism endorses the scientific method as the best tool to understand the universe around us. The value we have placed on it is well founded. Without science, we simply wouldn't have the world we have today with all of its modern comforts and conveniences.

Finally, humanism seeks to maximize human happiness and understanding. It can free us from what Christopher Hitchens called the “mind-forged manacles” of religion and supernatural belief, and that truly is a benefit to society.

