

# **Humanism for Secondary School Pupils**

**S1 – 3**



## **WHAT IS HUMANISM ?**

## Teaching materials for secondary schools – suitable for pupils in S1/S3

**There are two topics:**

1. What is Humanism?
2. The Origin of Religion



# HUMANISM

## Why Study Humanism?

The aim of religious education in schools is to help students understand the beliefs and customs of the many people we encounter in our daily lives. These people have their own particular way of understanding the world and trying to make sense of their lives. This course will help us to look at Humanist beliefs and traditions and how Humanists see the world in which we live. By the end of the course you will have a clear idea of what Humanism is and also how it relates to religion.



## Religious Stances

There are three different religious stances, or viewpoints, that can be found in the world today:

1. The **Theist** is someone who believes that God exists.
2. The **Agnostic** is unsure if God exists.
3. The **Atheist** does not believe that God exists.

**Humanism** is part of the **atheist** stance, since Humanists do not believe in any god or gods. Humanism is therefore not a religion but rather a **philosophy** or "*Life Stance*", a way of thinking and living. It is much more than just an atheist view of the world. It is very positive in its attitude to the world. The symbol used by Humanists is the figure of the "Happy Human" which sums up their positive, optimistic attitude towards life.



## What is Humanism?

The Humanist Society of Scotland describes Humanism in the following way:

*"Humanists believe that this is the only life we have and that we must strive to make it as worthwhile and happy as possible, for ourselves and others. We do **not** accept that there is evidence for the existence of any god or an afterlife and we believe we must face the problems of this world without the prospect of supernatural help. There is no need for life to have an 'ultimate purpose'. Life can have as much or as little purpose as each individual is able to give it."*

**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences.**

1. To what religious stance does Humanism belong?
2. What symbol do Humanists use?
3. What does the Humanists' symbol sum up?
4. What is the local Humanist group called?
5. Why do Humanists believe we should make life worthwhile?
6. Name two things Humanists do **not** believe.

**Extension Activity**

Why do you think we are here on Earth? How should we live our lives?



# THE HISTORY OF HUMANISM

Humanism is much older than even the oldest religions in the world, although it was not called Humanism until relatively recently, probably about the 17th or 18th century. This period in history is known as the “*Enlightenment*” since philosophers claimed that we become enlightened through our own thinking and study and we do not need to rely on religion and theology to guide us through life. Instead we use reason to work things out and decide for ourselves the best way to live.

Up to this point in time the Christian religion was the most influential guiding force in peoples’ lives. The teachings of the bible and the traditions of the different churches guided people through life and gave them a very strict set of rules for people to follow. To get through this life safely and reach heaven at the end all you had to do was to obey what you had been taught. There was no need to question anything in life – the churches had all the answers. Obedience to the church meant you didn’t even have to think for yourself or work things out. The answers were already laid out in black and white for you. This also related to matters outwith the Church itself. Science, law, medicine and other disciplines were governed by the Church and whatever the Church said about these matters had to be believed and accepted by everyone.



Christianity was the ultimate source of all knowledge and wisdom. Anyone who thought he knew better was soon put in his place and forced to back down or be put out of the church and be deprived of getting into heaven when he died. A very good example of this, which led philosophers into the period of the Enlightenment, was when the astronomer Galileo said that the Earth revolves around the sun. The Churches taught that the Earth was the centre of the universe. They based this teaching on various texts found in the bible. However scientists were aware that this was not in fact true. They used reason and their scientific methods to prove the Earth revolves around the sun. The famous astronomer Galileo was forced to back down by the Pope and accept that the church had more authority in astronomy than he had. It was only very recently that Pope John Paul II accepted that Galileo was right and offered an apology.

Humanists try to be rational in everything they do. They prefer to base their beliefs on things that can be proved from science and not just on stories from the bible. Reason is the most powerful tool when it comes to our beliefs. The period of the Enlightenment started a new way of looking at the world that was based on things we can prove rationally and not simply on religious beliefs that have no basis in fact.

Humanists try to create the best life possible for themselves and for everyone else. There have always been people in the world who do not believe in god but are positive, intelligent and very moral citizens. Some of the very early Greek philosophers, like Aristotle in the 3rd century BCE, thought that everyone can be truly happy by tapping into all that is good within them and becoming excellent at whatever they do. Later philosophers like Galileo, Newton, Kant, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and scientists like Pierre and Marie Curie agreed that we all have the capacity to think things out for ourselves without the help of religion and learn how to lead rewarding and fulfilling lives. One of the most famous Scottish Humanist thinkers was David Hume, the 18th century philosopher. Today there are some very well known Humanists such as Professor Richard Dawkins, Claire Rayner, Polly Toynbee and many members of Parliament.

**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences.**

1. How old is Humanism?
2. When was the term "*Humanism*" first used?
3. What does the term "*Enlightenment*" mean?
4. How do Humanists make their decisions in life?
5. Where did Greek philosophers believe happiness could be found?
6. Name five Humanist philosophers.
7. Who was the most famous Scottish humanist thinker?



**Extension Activity**

What things would make you really happy and fulfilled in life?

Describe a time in your life when you had to use your reason and didn't just listen to something you were told.

## HUMANIST BELIEFS

What do Humanists believe? Well, Humanists regard their way of life as a **philosophy** (the love of wisdom), rather than a **theology** (the study of God). Humanism does not have a **creed** (a fixed set of beliefs) like most religions and rejects many of the ideas found in religion and theology – for example:

- Life after death and immortality.
- Belief in a god who intervenes in the world.
- Belief that God reveals his will to humans.

Humanism on the other hand bases its beliefs on **history, experience** and **logic**. Think back to the story of Galileo. Humanists would rather believe scientists than what a religious person tells them because they help people find evidence for what they believe based on actual facts and not on religious myths and superstitions. When people ask questions like “*How was the world created?*” Humanists look to scientists for the answers and not to the stories found in the Bible or other religious writings.

Humans have a personal responsibility to shape their own lives, society and the world in which they live. These should not be left to religion, astrology, fortune tellers and prophets to sort out. Each of us must play our own part in changing our world for the better and not leave it to others. This creates an open, democratic society where everyone is valued and where their opinions and efforts count.

The values people share in common are very important to Humanists. These are values which most societies accept and can be used to help people create a better world to live in. They fall into three categories or groups:

- **Universal values** include life, liberty, truth, beauty and goodness.
- **Personal values** include gratitude, generosity, compassion, honesty, maturity and excellence.
- **Social values** include freedom, openness, opportunity and co-operation.

These values help to give meaning to our lives. We can then choose how to live our lives and act more responsibly towards the wider community, the animal kingdom, the environment and ourselves.



**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences**

1. What is "*Philosophy*"?
2. What is a "*Creed*"?
3. What 3 things do Humanists base their beliefs on?
4. Humanists believe in personal responsibility. Who do **you** trust to guide you through life? Who should **not** be trusted to help us with our lives?
5. List some Humanist personal values.



**Extension Activity**

What values are most important to you? Explain why.

Would you believe something just because someone told you it was true? Say why you would or wouldn't.

List some beliefs you have about life and the universe.

# HUMANIST MORALS AND ETHICS

Many people live their lives saying things like, “*I wish I had done...*”, or “*I would love to do...*”

Humanists believe that since this is the only life we have we must live it to the fullest and develop our potential to the maximum. This means that all our thoughts, feelings and actions should be directed towards making life better for ourselves and for other people. This type of behaviour is called moral or ethical since it is intended to benefit ourselves and the world in which we live.

## The Golden Rule

The basic principle on which all Humanist morality is founded is called the “*Golden Rule.*” Long before the major world religions existed, many people accepted the Golden Rule as the most important moral guideline for daily living. The Golden Rule simply states that we should treat other people as we would like to be treated ourselves. This means that every person who reflects on the types of behaviour and attitudes they find hurtful will be able to avoid causing the same type of hurt to others, thus making the world a much better place for everyone.

Britain has been greatly influenced by the Jewish/Christian tradition with all its laws and commands. Many of them are very complicated and often irrelevant in the 21st century. Both religions have also changed their stance on certain issues over the years too. Many things acceptable in the bible are no longer acceptable today. A good example is slavery. Both the Old and New Testaments of the bible seem to accept slavery yet Jews and Christians today do not. It is therefore very hard for Humanists to accept the bible is the ultimate source of what is right or wrong when the goalposts keep moving.

As far as right and wrong are concerned, Humanists prefer to accept the principles laid out in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. This is a form of “*consensus*” ethics which means that people can agree what is right or wrong by reasonable discussion and do not need to rely on god or religion for moral guidance.

Here are some of the principles that Humanists would like to see in today’s world to make it a happier place:

- Greater tolerance towards minority groups (gays, immigrants, etc.).
- Women being valued as highly as men.
- Better distribution of the world’s resources to relieve poverty.
- Legal voluntary euthanasia for adults.
- The right to die with dignity when one chooses.



**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences.**

1. How do Humanists believe we should live our lives?
2. What word is used to describe Humanist behaviour?
3. What rule is Humanism based on?
4. Sum up this rule in your own words.
5. What document do Humanists use to decide what is right or wrong?
6. What is “*Consensus*” ethics?
7. List 3 things Humanists think would make the world a better place.



**EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

Where do **you** learn right from wrong?

Who or what influences the way you think?

What changes would you like to see in the world to make it a better place?

## HUMANIST RITES OF PASSAGE

Human beings have celebrated the most important stages of life as long as can be remembered. These are often called “*Rites of Passage*” since they mark important stages that people pass through: birth, the coming of age, commitment, marriage and death. Humanists have special ceremonies to mark these stages and celebrate them very joyfully.

**Naming Ceremony:** When a child is born there is a gathering together of family and friends to congratulate the parents and welcome their baby into the community. Parents may explain the meaning of the name given to their child. Special adult friends are chosen to help the parents bring the child up to be happy and fulfilled in life. Presents and cards are given and people may also write their hopes for the child in a special commemorative book.

**Coming of Age Ceremony:** Some families celebrate the ‘coming of age’ of their child at the start of adolescence, at 16, 18 or 21, or when the child is ready to start work or leave home. These ceremonies are powerful events to mark an important change in the young person’s life, to offer them support and to wish them well for the future.

**Marriage & Commitment Ceremonies:** When a couple decide to marry, live together or commit themselves to a loving relationship, they often arrange a ceremony to let others share their joy. Guests are invited to witness the promises they make to each other. These promises, unlike those in religious ceremonies, are often made up by the couple themselves in order to express their own understanding of the commitment they are entering into. The couple will probably spend hours together discussing what they want to promise each other at the ceremony. This makes the promises and their commitment more meaningful to them.

**Funeral Ceremonies:** When a person dies it is usual to arrange a funeral ceremony. This allows the family and friends to grieve the loss of a loved one and say their final farewells. However, it is also a very valuable opportunity to celebrate the life of the deceased and joyfully remember all the good times they had together. There are no prayers or hymns at a Humanist funeral because they do not believe there is a god to help them or the person who has died. They believe that death is the end and there is no afterlife so there is no point in praying for anyone. It makes more sense to celebrate their lives instead.



**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences**

1. What are “*Rites of Passage*”?
2. What stages in life do Humanists celebrate?
3. What Rites of Passage have you experienced?

**Extension Activity**

Why is it important to celebrate –

- A birth?
- A wedding?
- A death?

Write a set of promises a couple could make to each other at their wedding.



## HUMANIST VIEW OF RELIGION

Humanists **do not** believe in god because they cannot find any evidence to suggest that god exists. In fact they believe it is up to those who follow a particular religion to prove that god **does** exist.

Humanists claim some religions are attempts by primitive people to find answers to the problems they experienced but didn't understand. If they wanted to explain thunder and lightning, earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, etc., they would describe these as signs that the gods were angry at something people had done. Many religions are based on the idea that our actions can be rewarded or punished by god. Humanists claim that science has simple explanations of these natural events and that there is no need to invent the idea of a god who rewards or punishes people. Science can help to prove how things happen because it is based on **factual evidence**. Unlike religion it does not rely on myths, superstitions or so-called "*Divine Revelation*".



Science also throws doubt on many of the central beliefs of religion which appear irrational and cannot be proved. It does not accept that there is a god who communicates messages to certain prophets and other holy people (Divine Revelation). It does not accept the miracles mentioned in many religions. It rejects the idea of life after death.

Humanism also sees a contradiction in the message of many religions since they leave too many unanswered questions. How can god be a "*god of love*" and yet give out such horrible punishments to people? How can a just god allow such horrific suffering, wars, murders and starvation in the world? How can so many "*good people*" be responsible for wars, terrorism, and torture when they deny others their human rights in the name of religion? Why are so many religious people hypocrites – preaching one message but living another?

**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences.**

1. Who do Humanists think should prove god exists?
2. What are many world religions based on?
3. Why do Humanists not accept the answers given by many religions?
4. How does science prove things?
5. Name three beliefs that science rejects.
6. List four questions that Humanism believes religions leave unanswered.

**Extension Activity**

Can you be a good person without believing in God? Explain why/why not.

Think of a non-religious person you know. What positive qualities do they have?



## HUMANIST POLICY ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Humanists believe schools should make clear that 'religious' and 'moral' are **not** the same thing. God should be introduced as an **idea** and not as a **fact**. The religious stories taught should not contradict what pupils learn in science. There should be a clear distinction between the supernatural and the natural. The great wealth of human achievements and discoveries, which have gone towards our understanding of the universe, should be emphasised. This understanding gives a sound, rational basis for moral values. It is important that young people should be aware of the great variety of cultures and beliefs and they should be encouraged to see what we share in common rather than what divides us.

This variety should be celebrated and pupils should be helped to understand the origins of religions and cultures, the benefits of these different values and the need to live together in the world. Humanists would encourage school assemblies to celebrate human achievements, anniversaries of famous people and historical events as well as celebrating various religious festivals.

Humanists believe that the most important aspect of a school is to inspire children to choose their own positive personal values and find ways of developing them as citizens.

Humanists are opposed to state-funded faith or denominational schools as they can foster prejudices in a community. The very existence of these schools results in a divisive education system and causes prejudice from those outside.

Humanists would like to see Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies being replaced with a module on Philosophy and Ethics. This should start at Primary school. In Secondary schools many moral and social issues are already studied in subjects like History, Modern Studies and PSHE.



**TASK. Please answer all questions in sentences.**

1. How should the idea of “God” be taught in schools?
2. What should schools help children to be aware of?
3. What would Humanists like to see celebrated at assemblies?
4. What is the most important aspect of school for Humanists?
5. Why do Humanists not like denominational schools?
6. What new subjects would Humanists like to see taught in schools?



**Extension Activity**

1. What aspects of RE in school are
  - a) Very useful?
  - b) Not very useful?
2. Has studying RE made you more understanding of and tolerant towards other people?  
Say why/why not.

**Short Essay** (about 200 words)

In your own words describe what you have learned about Humanism in this course.