

# Humanism on...

## Environment & Global Issues



**This resource will help you to understand, explore and analyse how Humanists approach environmental crises, poverty, and trade and aid. This will be helpful for those studying the Higher, National 5 or National 4 RMPS unit Morality, Environment and Global Issues.**

Other resources are available for teachers and students studying RME/RMPS in Scotland.

We also have trained volunteers who can visit your school and answer questions on Humanism. To find out more visit:  
**[www.humanism.scot/education](http://www.humanism.scot/education)**

We are always happy to answer questions for pupils who are completing their Added Value Unit or any other coursework and are looking for a Humanist response.

**Please email [admin@humanism.scot](mailto:admin@humanism.scot) your questions.**

### Key Learning Outcomes

Humanists are people who are not religious and look for real life evidence to help answer moral questions.

Humanists believe that we should take responsibility for environmental problems in order to foster a sustainable existence that supports human welfare and happiness.

Humanists believe that the pace of change is creating environmental issues that are becoming crises, such as climate change, and depletion of resources, habitats and biodiversity.

Humanists think that economic security is an integral part of human welfare, and that wealth distribution is as important as wealth creation.

Humanists assert that the causes of poverty include economic and social factors, and seek rational and scientific solutions for problems of poverty around the world.

This resource was developed by Humanist Society Scotland.

Higher/National 4&5 RMPS.

# Who Are Humanists?

**Humanism is a non-religious viewpoint. Humanists are people who form their views on moral issues through gathering evidence.**

They use **reason and think critically** about what they find to make decisions. Humanists don't have a central "authority" on right and wrong – there is no sacred text or leader of Humanists. Instead Humanism is a **way of thinking rather than a religion**. Because of this, Humanists will sometimes disagree with each other over the right answer to key problems.

Humanists, however, share an understanding that our world is best understood through **science, observation and rational enquiry** rather than accepting supernatural explanations that cannot be tested. Humanists also share an understanding that our decisions should **not unfairly impact on others**. Humanists think we are all ultimately responsible for our actions and future.

## Understand

1. How does a Humanist differ in the way they would make a moral decision in comparison to people of religious groups you have studied?
2. What would a Humanist consider when making a moral decision?
3. How do you decide what is right and wrong?

## Explore

1. Research and find out some information about a famous Humanist. Create a poster with facts about their life. See if you can find a quote they have said about a moral issue.
2. Create a survey to ask your class how they decide what is right and wrong. You might ask them if religion plays a part in this process, although make sure you keep the answers anonymous. Put your findings together in a chart.

## Analyse

1. Create a table of similarities and differences between Humanists and Christians.
2. In a group/pair discuss the following statements a Humanist might make about how they make moral decisions. What does each one tell you about Humanists?
  - "We are all responsible for our own life, we can't expect someone else to make decisions for us."
  - "I look at a wide range of art, books, films as well as science to understand how life works."
  - "I find not knowing the answer to every single question inspiring and makes me want to discover more."



Members of Humanist Society Scotland campaigning for the law to change on same-sex marriage in 2014

# Stewardship of the Environment

**Humanists believe that we should take responsibility for environmental problems in order to foster a sustainable existence that supports human welfare and happiness.**

Happiness should be secured now as well as in the future. Humanists do not believe that humans have any god-granted power over nature, and take a **positive view of environmental trusteeship for humans as an evolving part of the earth.** Humanist principles do not necessarily involve human-centrism and have continued to develop with growing ecological awareness.

Science and technology can be beneficial since they are based on reason and evidence. Humanists support the view that **scientific research and interventions can address environmental issues.** For example, after decades of research, 97% of climate scientists agree that human activity is responsible for climate change. Technological advancement can bring changes to energy sources and industrial practices.

Humanists have been actively engaged in environmental movements. Humanist Society Scotland has adopted and **supports the Earth Charter**, and has a group of **Eco-Humanists who focus on radical solutions for preventing climate chaos.** Humanist Society Scotland are a member of Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, a coalition that works together to tackle climate change in accordance with the Scottish Climate Change Act.

## Stop Climate Chaos Scotland

This diverse coalition of over 40 civil society organisations calls for the Scottish Government to take action in accordance with the Paris Agreement and global climate justice. The coalition is now campaigning for a new Climate Change Bill for Scotland, with a more ambitious target for an 80% reduction by 2030 and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045.



## Understand

1. Would you agree that technology helps us to address environmental issues? Humanists believe in the use of science and technology, but this use must be reasoned with evidence. Can you think of reasons to be concerned with the environmental effects of technology?
2. Why would a Humanist be concerned with the welfare of future generations? How would you weigh future welfare versus the welfare of the present generation?

## Explore

1. Research the measures taken by the Scottish Government to tackle climate change. Why might Eco-humanists campaign for more ambitious targets? Is it justifiable to give up some of the material abundance humans enjoy today for the good of natural ecosystems?
2. Some governments and politicians around the world do not agree with the Paris Agreement. See if you can find out the reasons they have given. Do you agree with them?

## Analyse

1. Find the list of organisations that make up Stop Climate Chaos Scotland. The coalition includes faith groups such as Christian Aid, the Church of Scotland, the Quakers, and the Scottish Episcopal Church. Read about the approach of one such faith group towards the environment. Compare its view of environmental trusteeship to the Humanist approach. What is similar and what is different?

# Environmental Crises

Our environment is changing. The pace of this change, as well as the type and cause of change, have alarmed many people around the world. Humanists are concerned with the environmental issues that are becoming crises, such as climate change as well as the depletion of resources, habitats and biodiversity.

**These crises negatively affect human welfare.** According to a report published in 2005, people in deprived areas of Scotland suffer disproportionately from a poor environment. Humanists recognise that many environmental crises are caused by, or made worse by, human activity. Humanists also argue that many of these issues can only be solved by proactive human intervention.

Humanists for a Better World is an organisation that works alongside Humanists UK, and **puts Humanist values into action**. Humanists believe that many environmental issues are at least partly due to human activity, and only able to be solved by humans. **Humanists emphasise positive actions in response to environmental crises and are often active social reformers.**

Humanists believe in an **open and accountable approach** to environmental crises. This requires the careful evaluation of economic success and business practices. Governments should **ensure that development can be justified**, and repair habitats damaged by human development.

## Humanist Profiles

**Name:** James Lovelock

**Occupation:** Scientist



“My main reason for not relaxing into contented retirement is that like most of you I am deeply concerned about the probability of massively harmful climate change and the need to do something about it now.”



## Understand

1. How might a Humanist evaluate the welfare of other living creatures and of ecosystems? To what extent is the welfare of human beings related to the state of the natural world?
2. Do you agree with James Lovelock's concern with "the probability of massively harmful climate change?"

## Explore

1. Read about the Sustainable Development Goals. How can they be justified from a Humanist perspective?
2. What do scientists predict for the future of climate change? Would you consider yourself optimistic or pessimistic?

## Analyse

1. Read about the life and work of scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock. Produce a poster on his life, ideas and inventions. Lovelock has recently argued for the notion of sustainable development to be abandoned in favour of sustainable retreat. What does he mean and what reasons does he give?

# Free trade and Fair Trade

**Humanists believe that economic security is an integral part of human welfare.**

Today, our lives are connected by local, regional and global trade. Many people who are concerned with the conditions of the poor agree that **trade is the route out of poverty**. At the same time, trade can involve many problems for producers, who depend heavily on international companies, global markets, natural resources and unpredictable weather. Therefore Humanists are concerned with bringing about **trade justice and a set of fair and just rules to promote the welfare of producers**.

**Humanists campaigned to bring Fair Trade to the attention of society**. While Fair Trade goods used to be found only in specialised shops in Scotland, they are now in high street supermarkets. Fair Trade is important to prevent the **unfair exploitation of others**. In order for trade to serve as a path out of poverty, its benefits must be fairly spread across those in developed as well as developing countries, producers as well as vendors and consumers. Humanists believe that **wealth distribution is as important as wealth creation**.

## Evidence in Action

Since 2013, Scotland has been a Fair Trade Nation after reaching the target of gaining Fair Trade status for all six cities and 18 of its 32 councils. It is the second nation in the world to achieve this status after Wales. Today, the Scottish Government continues to support Fair Trade globally, funding efforts including the Coffee Market Building for People and Prosperity project which works together with Rwanda's emergent coffee industry.



Over the past years, Fair Trade status has been increasing across the cities and local authority areas of Scotland. Most universities and schools also work towards Fair Trade status. The goals of Fair Trade include reducing poverty, improving the lives of producers, and helping people access their rights. However, there is evidence that the premium paid for Fair Trade products does not entirely go to producers and is instead claimed by businesses, employees or other expenses. Other voices have raised concerns with issues such as unethical selling techniques and the difficulty of monitoring standards.

## Understand

1. Have you seen a Fair Trade label before? What, in your opinion, distinguishes a Fair Trade product from a non-fair-trade product?
2. Give two reasons why a producer in a poorer part of the world might suffer from a lack of economic security.

## Explore

1. Research the impact of Fair Trade on producers of a specific item, such as chocolate or coffee. Do you believe that Fair Trade improves human welfare? What other changes would a Humanist call for given the existing system of trade?
2. Do you know of a city or council in Scotland that has Fair Trade status? Think of some ways in which Fair Trade status might lead to changes in the lives of local people.

## Analyse

1. Read the Evidence in Action section. Research a case in which the evidence shows that Fair Trade has not successfully lifted a community or a group of producers out of poverty, and offer your own suggestion of an alternative that may be more successful as a route out of poverty.

# Causes and effects of poverty

**Humanists seek rational and scientific solutions for problems of poverty around the world.**

The **causes** of poverty include economic and social factors, and often involve vicious cycles. For example, one cause of poverty is **environmental degradation**, in which unpredictable climate (often in a poor part of the world) leads to a further decrease in the level of investment. Another example is **structural poverty**. Those who are born into a poor family tend to enjoy fewer opportunities in life and can be disadvantaged in securing employment. This continued spiral means that poverty often becomes intergenerational.

The **effects** of poverty can include dire economic and social consequences, as well as damage to physical health and even death. There are many indirect effects of poverty, including increased migration from poorer parts of the world. **Humanists are concerned to tackle poverty and promote human welfare.** In 2015, the European Humanist Federation **called on EU leaders to respond properly to the humanitarian crisis** caused by the number of refugees and migrants trying to reach Europe. Humanists believe in decent treatment of migrants and their **fundamental rights to life and health**.

Humanist Society Scotland is also concerned with the causes and effects of poverty in Scotland. According to the findings of the Scottish Land Reform Review Group, a high proportion of land is owned privately in Scotland, and this concentration of power is unsustainable. Humanists believe in an **open, accessible planning system**, where information is publicly available and appeals can be effectively lodged against poor decisions.

## Humanist Profiles

**Name:** Ken Loach

**Occupation:** Film director



“The most vulnerable people are told their poverty is their own fault. If you have no work it is your fault that you haven’t got a job. It is shocking. It is not an issue just for people in our country, it is throughout Europe and there is a conscious cruelty in the way we are organising our lives now.”

## Understand

1. Can you think of an example in which poverty continues in a vicious cycle? Describe the way in which this case of poverty is self-perpetuating.
2. If Humanists believe in the fundamental rights to life and health, do they also believe in societies where wealth is equally distributed? What would be a Humanist response to the accumulation and concentration of wealth in the hands of a few?

## Explore

1. Research the definitions of the words “refugee” and “migrant”. Do you believe that governments should be responsible for the welfare of refugees? How about the welfare of migrants? Discuss what Humanists would say to the statement that we have no obligation to those outside of our borders.

## Analyse

1. Read about the life and work of Ken Loach, who is a strong supporter of Humanism. His films have depicted the struggles of people living in poverty and the cruelty of those around them. Do you think films, books and other media can help us understand the causes and effects of poverty? What are the other ways through which you have gained a better understanding of poverty?

# International Aid

Humanists believe that international aid is extremely important to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Many Humanists donate and campaign for a wide variety of charities working in development and anti-poverty work.

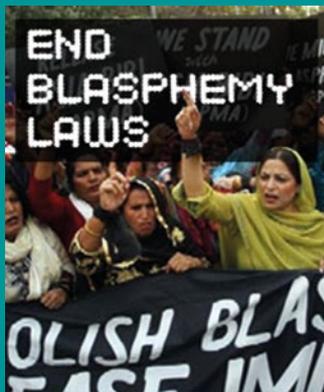
According to a survey of Humanists UK members in *Humanity* (2000), the most popular causes to which Humanists donate are those connected with social welfare (27%) and international aid (21%).

Humanist Society Scotland takes the view that it should work with other organisations and **individuals to protect the rights and interests of Humanists in Scotland and abroad**. For example, it has extended **the campaign to repeal laws that prohibit blasphemy in the country** to support similar campaigns around the world.

This is especially important at a time when Humanists International's annual Freedom of Thought Report shows that non-believers are still strongly discriminated against and persecuted across the world. Humanist Society Scotland is a partner in the International Coalition Against Blasphemy Laws. Humanist Society Scotland has **joined other organisations in calling on the Bangladesh government to protect human rights** in the aftermath of six deadly attacks on secularist writers and bloggers by religious militants in recent years.

## International Coalition Against Blasphemy Laws

The End Blasphemy Laws campaign is a coalition of international organisations such as Humanists International and European Humanist Federation and national bodies like Humanist Society Scotland. The campaign holds that "blasphemy laws" violate the human right to freedom of expression and legitimise violence and persecution. The coalition is especially concerned with the violence committed against individuals around the world today, including the 2009 murder of Christian men in Pakistan, violence against Bangladeshi bloggers, and persecution of minorities such as Ahmadiyya Muslims and Baha'is.



## Understand

1. According to Humanist values, is all international aid good? Are there ways in which international aid might have negative effects on the environment and on people?
2. Do you think that Humanists should only donate or collaborate with non-religious organisations? Or should Humanists also work with religious organisations on projects that align with Humanist values?

## Explore

1. Research one country in which "blasphemy laws" have been repealed since 2000. What do you think would change in people's lives without these laws?
2. Civil society groups such as Humanist Society Scotland call on governments to address international issues. Should governments take sole responsibility in engaging with other governments around the world or should civil society organisations also actively engage in international aid?

## Analyse

1. Research the campaign to end "blasphemy laws" in Scotland and a similar campaign in another part of the world. What is similar and what is different in these situations? Do Humanists and Humanist organisations face different challenges in these contexts?