

Humanism on...

Conflict



This resource will help you to understand, explore and analyse how Humanists approach the causes, consequences and alternatives to war. This will be helpful for those studying the Higher, National 5 or National 4 RMPS unit Morality and Conflict.

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

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 your questions.

Key Learning Outcomes

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

Most Humanists believe that war should be used only as a last resort, but that some wars can be justified in terms of self-defence or for altruistic reasons.

Humanists oppose violence that is motivated by religious grounds, and assert that religious goals are not a justifiable source of violent conflict.

Humanists believe that modern warfare is driven by huge technological advancements in military equipment that can be used to indiscriminately harm innocent people, and we need to use reason and evidence to overcome the risks of such technology.

Humanists think that wars are very destructive and the ultimate consequence of war (death) is final. They also believe that decent treatment of refugees in the aftermath of war and conflict is hugely important.

Humanists emphasise the importance of a careful and reasoned consideration of all alternatives to war, and believe in the need for international cooperation to prevent the escalation of conflict and violence.

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

Causes/Justifications for war

Humanists believe we can use our natural capacities of **reason** and **empathy** to overcome some of our less desirable natural instincts. An emphasis on reason and evidence means that Humanists call for the careful consideration of all other options before embarking on the path of war. Humanists do not share a universal framework on the adequate justification of war, although **some Humanists believe that violence can be justified in self-defence or for altruistic reasons**, on the national as well as individual levels. **Many Humanists believe that war must only be a measure of last resort.**

Some Humanists have been pacifists. Between the two World Wars, many Humanists were active in peace efforts, such as those of the League of Nations. For example, the Humanists Eleanor Roosevelt and John Peter Humphrey went on to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Humanists oppose violence that is motivated by religious grounds, since human welfare should not be harmed by the achievement of a religious goal or a spiritual reward for those who take part. Religious goals are not a justifiable source of national conflict. Humanist Society Scotland **puts this belief into action by closely following the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP)**, which promotes secularism and the separation of church and state across Europe. As stated at the 2014 World Humanist Congress, “freedom of belief is absolute but the freedom to act on a belief is not.”

Humanist Profiles

Name: Bertrand Russell

Occupation: Philosopher



Bertrand Russell was a philosopher who opposed war on the grounds that it contradicted humanity and civilisation. During the First World War, he was imprisoned for being a conscientious objector. In an essay published in 1915, ‘War and Non-Resistance,’ he wrote that “either man will abolish war, or war will abolish man.” He did not remain a lifelong pacifist, as the Nazi Party’s rise to power in Germany led to the belief that war was sometimes necessary even if it was always terrible. After the Second World War, he was gravely concerned about weapons of mass destruction, and became the first president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958. Together with his good friend Albert Einstein, he issued the “Russell-Einstein Manifesto,” a document that launched the modern anti-war movement.

Understand

1. Why would a Humanist support war? Think of at least two situations in which war could be justified on Humanist principles.
2. Does the justification for war on Humanist principles differ from justification by other religious systems you have studied?

Explore

1. Read the profile of Bertrand Russell, whose views on war changed when he witnessed the rise of Nazi Germany. What is your stance on war and what kind of event might change it?
2. Consider the Humanist principle behind the statement that the “freedom of belief is absolute but the freedom to act on a belief is not.” How is the Humanist approach in this case similar or different to the other religions you have studied?

Analyse

1. Humanists are opposed to wars that are fought on religious grounds, where ideology is allowed to significantly harm human welfare. However, many of the conflicts in the 20th century have occurred in non-religious regimes, such as the Soviet Union and Pol Pot’s Cambodia. How would a Humanist respond to the claim that atheism also leads to conflict and war?

Modern warfare

Whereas the most basic tools were used in the first human wars, modern warfare has come about due to the spectacular technological advancements in military equipment. These technologies include intercontinental missiles and automated vehicles, as well as forms of biological and cyber warfare. **Humanists believe in the use of reason and evidence to overcome the risks of technology.** This is a challenge in our time because the disproportionate power of technology may lead to malfunction, serious mistakes and indiscriminate killing. It is therefore important that the use of technology is aligned with the **Humanist principles that protect human welfare.**

Although some Humanists accept the justification of war as a measure of last resort, the potential negative effects of modern warfare on human wellbeing are very serious. Humanists are especially concerned about the **indiscriminate harm of innocent people** through the use of modern weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear bombs as well as chemical and biological weapons. Humanists are also concerned with the **disproportionate power** of modern weapons and their capacity to damage human life in irreversible and wide-ranging ways.

Terrorism is often based on adherence to ideology and faith, and therefore **many Humanists, who believe in evidence and reason, reject it as a strategy.** Humanists believe that the key to terrorism motivated by religion is tackling the religious radicalisation which makes people believe they are tasked “from God” to commit acts of murder.

Humanist Biographies: the Sheehy-Skeffington family

Owen Sheehy-Skeffington was an Irish professor and senator who publicly professed himself a Humanist and an agnostic. He campaigned against corporal punishment in Irish schools and helped to set up the Humanist Association of Ireland. Owen’s parents, Hanna and Francis, were radical activists who were severely criticised for not having their child baptised. During the Easter Rising of 1916, Hanna sympathised with the insurgents and later supported the anti-Treaty IRA during the Irish Civil War. Francis, on the other hand, had contributed to pacifist publications in the period before the First World War, and opposed the violent methods of the insurgents, writing in an open letter in 1915 that the movement, growing “towards the stature of a full-grown militarism, its essence – preparation to kill – grows more repellent to me.”



Understand

1. Give two ways in which technology might increase the damage to human welfare and two ways in which it might protect human welfare.
2. Why might a Humanist object to the capacity of modern weapons to indiscriminately kill people, especially civilians?

Explore

1. Research the definitions of “freedom struggle” and “terrorism”. What are the chief differences between the two? Can you think of an historical case that is not clear-cut and spans the two definitions?
2. Consider a case in which a weapon of mass destruction has been deployed and some argue this is positive (including the possibility of a worse alternative if it had not been used). How would you weigh the evidence supporting its use versus the evidence against its use?

Analyse

1. Read the biographies of the Sheehy-Skeffington family and research the Easter Rising of 1916. Would a Humanist support armed struggle in this case? Why might Humanists not have a unified approach to the use of violence?

Consequences of war

Wars are very destructive. They often harm and kill life, and degrade the environment. Wars can cause physical suffering as well as economic and social consequences for humans and non-human beings. This is of great significance to Humanists, who **believe that there is no life after death and the consequences of war are final**. The destruction of life is a matter of great concern to Humanists, who support the fundamental right to life. **Humanist Society Scotland supports the European Convention on Human Rights**, adopted in Rome on 4 November 1950, which states that the first right is the right to life, and the second right is the prohibition of torture or inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment.

There is evidence that war can have severe economic consequences. One of the most serious effects is **a spiral towards poverty**, since war-torn countries are less able to provide public services and attract investment. The destruction of infrastructure, homes and natural resources can also fuel continued resentment and lead to the continuation of war.

Another consequence of war is the increased flow of refugees. This has led to moral discussions on the responsibilities of governments to respond to such humanitarian crises. **Humanists believe in the decent treatment of refugees in the aftermath of war and conflict**. In 2015, the European Humanist Federation called on EU leaders to open legal and safe access for refugees and respect the principle of non-refoulement.

Humanist Profiles

Name: Alf Dubs

Occupation: Politician



“What it boils down to is to say we must abandon these children to their fate, lest if we do anything, others may follow in their footsteps. I am not prepared to take that position ... I’m now getting so many messages from people I don’t even know, saying how much they want this to succeed. It’s really struck a chord: it’s caught the public’s imagination that as a country we can do something for these children.

Understand

1. Why would a Humanist believe that the consequences of war can be final and irreversible? Does this rest on a set of beliefs different to those of religions you have studied?
2. Give the main reasons why you think war can lead to poverty and physical suffering.

Explore

1. Research the concept of “non-refoulement”. Many refugees come from parts of the world in which economic and political flourishing is not possible. Why would a Humanist support the principle of non-refoulement?
2. Why would a Humanist support human rights as a framework that promotes human welfare?

Analyse

1. Read the quote by Alf Dubs, a former Member of Parliament, who was one of 669 Czech children saved by the British stockbroker Nicholas Winton from the Nazis. Why would a Humanist such as Alf Dubs emphasise empathy as a response to war and conflict? Does empathy based on Humanist principles differ from empathy based on religious grounds?

Alternatives

Humanists do not have a universal agreement on the reasons for war, and some Humanists believe that war may be justified in certain contexts where the refusal to go to war would be even worse. However, since war may result in great damage to human welfare, **Humanists emphasise the careful and reasoned consideration of all alternatives to war.** Humanists emphasise the importance of **the individual's decision based on reason.** This may lead to a variety of conclusions given the evidence available to the individual. **Humanists believe that it is morally acceptable to be a conscientious objector.** Some Humanists are prepared to support sanctions, although they **require evidence to show that no unnecessary harm will be caused.**

Humanists believe in **the need for international cooperation,** especially among civil society organisations, to prevent the escalation of conflict and violence. **Humanist Society Scotland has begun a partnership with the Association for Secular Humanism in Malawi** to tackle witchcraft-based accusations and violence. Humanists International represents the Humanist movement at the United Nations and engages with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights as well as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union.

Humanist Profiles

Name: Adele Anderson

Occupation: Actress and singer

“A belief, which is espoused in most religions although often overlooked, is that we should try and live a good life and love one another. That is what I try to do. Rather like the Hippocratic Oath, I try to do no harm, but not because I think I will get something in return. I don't believe in karma. Bad things happen to good people and bad people often get away with it and don't lose any sleep over it either. But I would, so I suppose I must have a conscience of some sort and that is what I answer to.



Understand

1. Give two reasons why international cooperation can prevent mounting conflict and war.
2. Why would a Humanist emphasise the need to carefully consider all alternatives to war? Would a Humanist's considerations be different from someone who based his beliefs in a religious system you have studied?

Explore

1. Humanists seek evidence to show that an alternative to war (such as sanctions) would not cause unnecessary harm. When do you think harm is necessary and when is it unnecessary? Provide examples for both cases.
2. Research the beginnings of a war that has occurred in the past 50 years and the reasons and justifications given by leaders and politicians. Is there evidence provided in their statements? How would a Humanist evaluate these claims?

Analyse

1. Read the quote by Adele Anderson which concludes with the notion of a “conscience”, which is also related to the practice of conscientious objectors. Do you agree that there is such a thing as a conscience, and if so, what does it mean to you? Many conscientious objectors in history have been religious. How would a Humanist justify being a conscientious objector?