

The Amsterdam Declaration

Humanism has no doctrine, no set of beliefs or code that you must sign up to. Nonetheless there is a great deal of agreement between humanists on many beliefs, values, and goals.

In 1952 the world had recently experienced the devastation of the Second World War and was now entering the Cold War. It was then, at the first **World Humanist Congress**, that the founders of **Humanists International** (then called the International Humanist and Ethical Union) agreed on a set of principles that they felt best described humanism. It was called **The Amsterdam Declaration**.



- 1) Why do you think Humanists International wanted to write such a declaration? Do you think this was a good idea?

Many humanists see humanism as a fluid and flexible way of thinking about how we should live. They believe we should be prepared to update our principles and goals informed by our developing understanding of the world and each other. Humanism embraces the potential for improvement.

In the spirit of an approach to life that is **open to change**, Humanists International returned to the Amsterdam Declaration 50 years later in 2002 and updated it to reflect the ambitions of humanists. Few humanists would say that this new Amsterdam Declaration was the 'finished article'. Many see humanism as more of an ongoing conversation.

- 2) Do you think it was a good idea to update the document?
- 3) Compare the two versions. How has it changed? How does it reflect the ways that our understanding of the world and each other, and our concerns, might have changed in the 50 years in between?
- 4) How do you imagine it might change in the future?



Some of the founding members of Humanists International (1952)

Amsterdam Declaration 2002

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

- 1) **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.
- 2) **Humanism is rational.** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.
- 3) **Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
- 4) **Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.
- 5) **Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
- 6) **Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination** and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.
- 7) **Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment** through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour.

Amsterdam Declaration 1952

This congress is a response to the wide spread demand for an alternative to the religions which claim to be based on revelation on the one hand, and totalitarian systems on the other. The alternative offered as a third way out of the present crisis of civilisation is humanism, which is not a new sect, but the outcome of a long tradition that has inspired many of the world's thinkers and creative artists and given rise to science itself. Ethical humanism unites all those who cannot any longer believe the various creeds and are willing to base their conviction on respect for man as a spiritual and moral being. The fundamentals of modern, ethical humanism are as follows:

- 1) **It is democratic.** It aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that this is a matter of right. The democratic principle can be applied to all human relationships and is not restricted to methods of government.
- 2) **It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively.** It advocates a world-wide application of scientific method to problems of human welfare. Humanists believe that the tremendous problems with which mankind is faced in this age of transition can be solved. Science gives the means but science itself does not propose the ends.
- 3) **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the dignity of man and the right of the individual to the greatest possible freedom of development compatible with the right of others. There is a danger in seeking to utilise scientific knowledge – in a complex society individual freedom may be threatened by the very impersonal machine that has been created to save it. Ethical humanism, therefore, rejects totalitarian attempts to perfect the machine in order to obtain immediate gains at the cost of human values.
- 4) **It insists that personal liberty is an end that must be combined with social responsibility in order that it shall not be sacrificed to the improvement of material conditions.** Without intellectual liberty, fundamental research, on which progress must in the long run depend, would not be possible. Humanism ventures to build a world on the free person responsible to society. On behalf of individual freedom humanism is un-dogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.
- 5) **It is a way of life, aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment, through the cultivation of ethical and creative living.** It can be a way of life for everyone everywhere if the individual is capable of the responses required by the changing social order. The primary task of humanism today is to make men aware in the simplest terms of what it can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising in this context and for purposes of peace the new power which science has given us, humanists have confidence that the present crisis can be surmounted. Liberated from fear the energies of man will be available for a self-realisation to which it is impossible to foresee the limit.

Ethical humanism is thus a faith that answers the challenge of our times. We call upon all men who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this cause.

Note that although the text makes use of words like 'spiritual' and 'faith', these words should not necessarily be understood as having a religious or supernatural meaning. People then, as now, might use words, often associated with religion, in a non-religious sense. Humanism then, as now, was a non-religious approach to life that saw itself as an alternative to religions.