

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 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 fifty years later in 2002, and then again in 2022, and updated it to reflect the ambitions of humanists. Few humanists would say that the latest Amsterdam Declaration was the 'finished article'. Many see humanism as an ongoing conversation.

- 2) Do you think it was a good idea to update the document?
- 3) Compare the 1952 and 2022 versions. What is the same? What has changed? How might any changes reflect the ways that our understanding of the world and each other, our concerns, and our priorities have developed in the fifty 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 2022

Humanist beliefs and values are as old as civilization and have a history in most societies around the world. Modern humanism is the culmination of these long traditions of reasoning about meaning and ethics, the source of inspiration for many of the world's great thinkers, artists, and humanitarians, and is interwoven with the rise of modern science. As a global humanist movement, we seek to make all people aware of these essentials of the humanist worldview:

1) Humanists strive to be ethical

- We accept that morality is inherent to the human condition, grounded in the ability of living things to suffer and flourish, motivated by the benefits of helping and not harming, enabled by reason and compassion, and needing no source outside of humanity.
- We affirm the worth and dignity of the individual and the right of every human to the greatest possible freedom and fullest possible development compatible with the rights of others. To these ends we support peace, democracy, the rule of law, and universal legal human rights.
- We reject all forms of racism and prejudice and the injustices that arise from them. We seek instead to promote the flourishing and fellowship of humanity in all its diversity and individuality.
- We hold that personal liberty must be combined with a responsibility to society. A free person has duties to others, and we feel a duty of care to all of humanity, including future generations, and beyond this to all sentient beings.
- We recognise that we are part of nature and accept our responsibility for the impact we have on the rest of the natural world.

2) Humanists strive to be rational

- We are convinced that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human reason, and action. We advocate the application of science and free inquiry to these problems, remembering that while science provides the means, human values must define the ends. We seek to use science and technology to enhance human well-being, and never callously or destructively.

3) Humanists strive for fulfilment in their lives

- We value all sources of individual joy and fulfilment that harm no other, and we believe that personal development through the cultivation of creative and ethical living is a lifelong undertaking.
- We therefore treasure artistic creativity and imagination and recognise the transforming power of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts. We cherish the beauty of the natural world and its potential to bring wonder, awe, and tranquillity. We appreciate individual and communal exertion in physical activity, and the scope it offers for comradeship and achievement. We esteem the quest for knowledge, and the humility, wisdom, and insight it bestows.

4) Humanism meets the widespread demand for a source of meaning and purpose to stand as an alternative to dogmatic religion, authoritarian nationalism, tribal sectarianism, and selfish nihilism

- Though we believe that a commitment to human well-being is ageless, our particular opinions are not based on revelations fixed for all time. Humanists recognise that no one is infallible or omniscient, and that knowledge of the world and of humankind can be won only through a continuing process of observation, learning, and rethinking.
- For these reasons, we seek neither to avoid scrutiny nor to impose our view on all humanity. On the contrary, we are committed to the unfettered expression and exchange of ideas, and seek to cooperate with people of different beliefs who share our values, all in the cause of building a better world.
- We are confident that humanity has the potential to solve the problems that confront us, through free inquiry, science, sympathy, and imagination in the furtherance of peace and human flourishing.
- We call upon all who share these convictions to join us in this inspiring 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.