

DISCOVERING HUMANISM

Many humanists don't first learn about humanism and then decide to adopt a humanist approach to life. Instead they discover the label 'humanist' as one that fits the approach to life that they already held.

“I was a humanist without knowing it for many years before I found the British Humanist Association – when I did, it was like finding a sort of home. Here were people with a range of views that matched my own.”

CLAIRE RAYNER,
former Humanists UK Vice-President

HOW IS THE LABEL 'HUMANIST' USED?

The word 'humanism' was first used to describe a particular set of beliefs and values long after those beliefs and values had emerged. Something similar happens for many individuals who choose to identify with the label 'humanist'. They adopted the label as one that describes an approach to life that they already held. Their 'humanism' is discovered. In that sense, it operates quite differently from many religious labels, which are often adopted (or applied) while (or before) one develops the associated beliefs. Discovering that the label 'humanist' describes one's worldview is perhaps like the discovery of a label to describe one's sexual orientation.

Surveys by YouGov reveal that around one in five people in the UK share humanist beliefs and values, but the number who self-identify as humanist is smaller (around 5%). There are therefore many people who hold a humanist worldview but do not use the label (some might use a different label such as 'atheist' or 'agnostic' to describe themselves).

Sometimes people have made a conscious choice not to use the label. However, often individuals have simply never come across the word. Humanism has only recently been included in many young people's education about religion and worldviews. Today most people discover the word through attending a humanist wedding or funeral.

LABELLING

Many humanists don't approve of labelling children with a particular religious or non-religious worldview. They think everyone should have the **choice** to decide what they believe and how they want to describe themselves. Some humanists say we would find it odd to label a child with a particular political view (e.g. a 'socialist' child or a 'conservative' child), and the same is true for religious or non-religious labels.

A humanist naming ceremony does not label a child as a humanist. Instead, the focus is often on the child's **freedom** to decide for themselves what they believe and how they want to live, and the responsibility of other people to **support** them to find their own path in life.



“Most people I've worked with to put together naming ceremonies have chosen that way to welcome their child because they want their child to be free to decide for themselves when they're old enough what they do or don't believe.”

HANNAH, humanist celebrant

SHOULD PEOPLE USE THE LABEL?

'It is essential to nail one's colours to the mast as a humanist.'



STEPHEN FRY,
Patron of Humanists UK

When people who hold humanist beliefs discover the word 'humanism', and its meaning is explained to them, many will be happy to apply the label to themselves (around three quarters of them, according to a poll¹ from 2017). However, some choose not to, preferring not to use a label. Many humanists sympathise with this – labels can be problematic. Some humanists claim that it doesn't really matter how people describe themselves – what matters is how they behave.



On the other hand, some humanists will argue that there is value in adopting the label. They say it can be useful to those who have had difficult journeys to humanism, and perhaps feel that they are alone, to know that other people share their beliefs and to learn about the contribution those beliefs have made to human history.

Some humanists also believe that the more that people openly use the label, the stronger the humanist voice becomes. Where religious privilege exists, as it does in many countries, adopting a shared label can help add weight to the case for challenging inequality.



¹ YouGov (2017): [humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs](https://www.humanism.org.uk/2017/06/15/new-poll-shows-one-in-five-are-humanists-and-a-third-hold-humanist-beliefs)

'I didn't actually realise that I was a humanist until I went to a humanist funeral and I started to read about humanism and I thought this philosophy fits me exactly.'



MICHELLE BECKETT

'I don't think I'd even heard the word humanism until I saw a job advertised for a public affairs officer at the British Humanist Association. I started to read more about humanism and that's when I knew that that's exactly my beliefs.'

NAOMI PHILLIPS



'I decided to become a humanist quite late in life. I was raised religiously and then discovered atheism as many people do. But atheism wasn't quite enough for me. It defined me in a negative way by saying something I didn't believe. When I found humanism it was a delightful revelation because I could finally describe myself with a word which was positive and said a lot about what I do believe in.'



ALEX WILLIAMS



QUESTIONS:

- Do you think it is possible to be a humanist and not know it?
- Do you think it's OK to apply religious labels to children?
- At what age do you think we should be allowed to label ourselves?
- Do you think we all have to choose a label to describe our worldview?