

A HISTORY OF HUMANISTS UK

Humanists UK was founded in 1896 as the **Union of Ethical Societies**. The ethical societies were groups, whose members wanted to live good lives, without any supernatural beliefs. They met to discuss ideas, to work for social change, and to socialise.

When the Union of Ethical Societies was formed, it included the North, South, West, and East London groups. By 1906, just ten years later, there were 40 groups linked to the Union. Eventually there would be over 70 of these societies all across the UK, and later the Union would become Humanists UK.



FELIX ADLER (1851–1933) was an American writer, philosopher, and social reformer who created the Ethical Culture movement in 1876. The son of a Jewish rabbi, Felix Adler founded the Society for Ethical Culture of New York, with the motto: 'deed not creed'. He wanted to unite people of all beliefs in working together for good. He believed that ethics did not come from god or religion, but from using reason and compassion as a guide. This is a belief shared by many humanists today. Felix Adler's Society for Ethical Culture inspired many more, including in the United Kingdom.

WORKING FOR A BETTER WORLD

Members of the ethical societies were people with a shared desire to make the world a better place. Many of them were active in all kinds of efforts for change, including working for peace through anti-war groups, working for improvements in schools and education, and working for women to be allowed to vote in elections, through suffrage societies. Women were not able to vote on the same terms as men until 1928, and many humanists fought hard for this success.

EDUCATION

From the beginning, the Union of Ethical Societies was interested in education. This included providing talks and classes to adults, as well as working for what they called 'moral education' in schools. Moral education focused on teaching young people how to be good citizens: to live good, ethical lives alongside others. The ethical societies saw this as separate from religious instruction, as they believed that morality did not depend on having a belief in God.

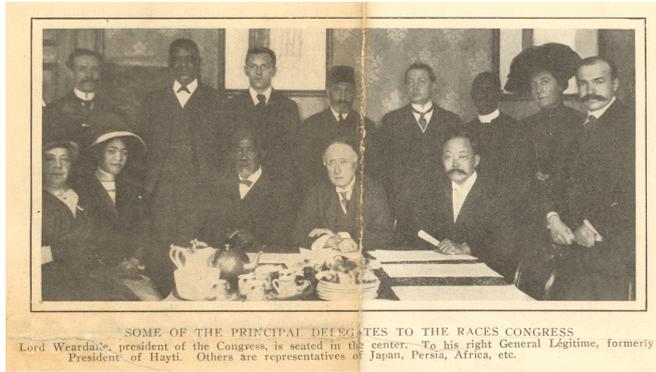
In 1908, the Union of Ethical Societies organised the first International Moral Education Congress, which brought people from all over the world together in London to discuss moral education, and to learn from each other.



Sophie Bryant, a mathematician and teacher who promoted moral education.

EQUALITY

The First Universal Races Congress was organised by the Union of Ethical Societies in 1911. It was the first ever conference against racism, and brought together representatives from all over the world to encourage better understanding and relationships between them.



Attendees of the first Universal Races Congress, 1911. Gustav Spiller is on the back row, far left.

Most of the organisation was done by Gustav and Nina Spiller, who were both very active in the early humanist movement. Gustav Spiller was a printer, who had been born in Hungary, and became a full-time worker for the Union of Ethical Societies. His wife, Nina, was a suffragist, who spent many years of her life working in England and internationally for women’s right to vote in elections.

The Universal Races Congress brought people from over 50 different countries to London, bringing key humanist values of cooperation, empathy, and democracy to bear on working for world peace and understanding.



The World in Council by John Henry Adams, 1911, printed alongside a report of the First Universal Races Congress in W.E.B. Du Bois’ journal *The Crisis*

THE BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

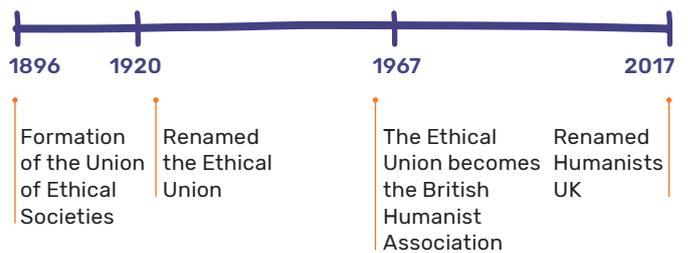
The Ethical Union officially became the British Humanist Association in 1967, although it had been working with other humanist organisations (such as the Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society) for some years using a similar name. The British Humanist Association had a humanist counselling service, an adoption agency (to help non-religious people adopt children, which was more difficult at that time), a housing association, and a broadcasting group.



A British Humanist Association conference in the 1960s

HUMANISTS UK

The British Humanist Association became Humanists UK in 2017. This change of name showed that the organisation wanted to be representative of everyone in the United Kingdom. Today, it is the biggest charity representing non-religious people in the UK, and has over 100,000 members and supporters.



ZONA VALLANCE

(1860-1904) was the first Honorary Secretary of the Union of Ethical Societies (essentially Humanists UK’s first Chief Executive), and the first Secretary of the Moral Instruction League (mentioned above). As well as these roles, Zona Vallance wrote about women’s rights, and even went on a lecture tour in America.

