

## Humanist history: from radical ideas to common sense

For as long as there have been human beings, we have looked around for explanations of the world, and asked questions about how to live. Many have based their answers on gods and supernatural thinking, but other ancient thinkers looked to what they could see and experience to make sense of the world. They thought about ways to live well with other people, and about how to be happy, based on human needs and values. They focused on what could be done while they were alive on earth, rather than imagining another life after they died. Today we call this non-religious approach 'humanist'.

In Roman Britain, religious and non-religious schools of thought co-existed, including a rich tradition of humanist thinking, drawn originally from the ancient Greeks. Then followed centuries when the power of Christianity made it difficult and dangerous to express humanist ideas. Even during this period, there were people willing to challenge and resist religious thinking, but this could be perilous.

Then came the Renaissance and afterwards the Enlightenment, and the idea that human reason could discover the natural laws of the universe, establish the rights of humankind, and achieve progress in knowledge, technology, and society.

By the Victorian age, scientific discoveries, historical study, and contact with other cultures and beliefs had led many to question traditional religious ideas, and movements based on rational thinking, social change, and equality began to grow.

By the late 19th century, many people in the UK held humanist beliefs, and humanist community organisations of various kinds had formed. These groups continued through the 20th century, and were involved in campaigns for all kinds of causes.

In the decades since, many humanist values have become the 'common sense' of the majority of people in the UK and surveys show that over half the population of Britain are non-religious. Today, humanists continue campaigning to promote freedom of belief around the globe and create a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail.

### Questions

1. Watching the video, what words are connected to humanist beliefs across time?
2. What other figures from history do you think shared a broadly humanist worldview, or contributed to humanist ideas and action?

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