

The origins of humanist organisations

Humanist thought has a long and rich history. Examples of humanist beliefs about life and death, the nature of the world, and how to live can be found in writings from ancient India, China, and Europe. Humanist ideas blossomed again during the Enlightenment when human reason was seen as the solution to building a world that supported human understanding and wellbeing. Explicitly humanist organisations, however, only appeared in more recent history. Their origins overlapped with a number of other nineteenth century non-religious organisations and groups.

The Rationalists: *seeking knowledge and sharing ideas*

Rationalists believed that reason and science provided the best means of discovering truth. They were critical of 'unquestionable' religious claims and set out to educate people about alternative ways of understanding the world. Believing in the value of sharing and challenging ideas, they recognised that the pursuit of knowledge was an ongoing quest. The [Rationalist Press Association](#) was founded by radical publisher Charles Albert Watts in 1885. It published a range of pamphlets and cheap reprints of classic texts from science and philosophy, including the works of Charles Darwin and John Stuart Mill. At only sixpence a volume, this opened up non-religious explanations for life and approaches to morality to ordinary working people. Today, known as the Rationalist Association, it publishes the *New Humanist* magazine.

The Ethicists: *being good and finding community*



The first ethical culture organisation was founded in New York by Felix Adler in 1876. However, soon after, similar organisations began to appear in London, and in 1896 they became the [Union of Ethical Societies](#) (later this organisation would become the British Humanist Association and then Humanists UK). Adler advocated 'deed not creed'. By that, he meant what was important was what you did, not what you believed. He wanted to unite people of all beliefs in working together for good. For ethicists it was possible to be 'good without god'. Instead, human beings could use reason and empathy to work out how to treat one another. Ethicists argued for international peace and for moral (rather than religious) education in schools. They challenged racism and fought for equality and votes for women. Community was also important to ethicists. In 1929, in London, Conway Hall opened as a home for the South Place Ethical Society and became a space for non-religious people to come together and celebrate through music and the arts.

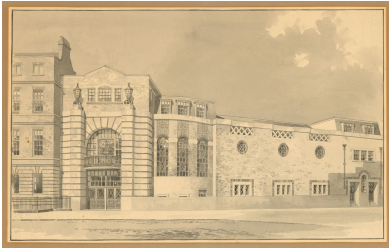
The Secularists: *speaking up and taking action*

George Jacob Holyoake's original definition of 'secularism' was 'a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human' (close in meaning to modern humanism). Secularism today, however, typically refers to a stance on how society should be organised: one which states that no single religious or non-religious worldview should have any privileged powers over the state and that everybody should have freedom of religion or belief. These were the grounds on which many of the early secularists (a largely working-class movement) challenged the power of the established Church. The [National Secular Society](#) was formed in 1866. Secularists promoted individual freedoms and challenged discrimination against the non-religious. Acknowledging that change required speaking up, their approach was to take action through political campaigning and protest. They fought for free speech, and for the removal of laws against blasphemy or criticism of religion; they pushed for reform of parliament and public broadcasting to remove religious privileges; and they argued for the rights of women to birth control and divorce.

In reality, the division between these three groups can't be so neatly broken up. Their activity often crossed over and sometimes they collaborated. From 1950-1963 the Ethical Union, the Rationalist Press Association, and the National Secular Society came together to form the Humanist Council. While this union did not last, they continued to share many goals.

These three outlooks, rationalism, ethicism, and secularism, represent core features of the modern humanist approach to life. One might think of them as the head, the heart, and the hands of humanism. Humanism is a worldview that places value on reason, empathy, and taking action. Humanists today support the scientific endeavour, promote kindness and altruism, and work for human rights and freedoms. They believe this approach is the best way to support people to lead full and flourishing lives in the here and now.

 <p>Zona Vallance (1860-1904) was the first Honorary Secretary of the Union of Ethical Societies (essentially Humanists UK's first Chief Executive). She wrote passionately about women's rights and equality, and campaigned for moral education.</p>	 <p>Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) was the founder of the National Secular Society and a vocal campaigner for free speech. Elected as an MP in 1880, he refused to swear allegiance to God, arguing for the right to be an atheist.</p>	 <p>Har Dayal (1876-1966) was a rationalist and revolutionary. An early leader in the Indian movement for independence from British rule, he argued for democracy and emphasised the importance of rational thinking and discussion.</p>
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<p><u>Conway Hall</u> in Red Lion Square, London, is one of the only buildings built by and for non-religious people: a space that symbolises the different goals and aspirations of humanism. It is a space for humanists to gather together and enjoy music and song; its main hall has been the site of many speeches motivating humanists into action; and its library today is a great store of humanist wisdom from across the ages.</p>	
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<p>Rationalists Thinking carefully Seeking knowledge, challenging assumptions, and sharing ideas.</p>	<p>Ethicists Being good Bringing people together in community and supporting human wellbeing.</p>	<p>Secularists Taking action Promoting and campaigning for human rights and freedoms.</p>
<p>Humanists Living a full and flourishing life in the here and now and helping others to do the same.</p>		