

Humanist Perspective

Prejudice and discrimination



A humanist approach

When considering questions about how we ought to treat people and organise society, humanists try to apply **evidence** and **empathy** to inform their decisions. This is supported by their respect for **personal autonomy** and **human rights**, and a desire to support people's wellbeing. They believe that this is the **one life** we have and that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find **happiness** in the here and now.

Human beings like to feel part of a group and many have a tendency to be suspicious or afraid of anyone or anything new and different. There may have been a survival advantage to this approach in our evolutionary past. Humanists, however, believe that other aspects of human nature, such as reason and empathy, can help us to reject such tribalism. They believe that every human being has dignity and equal worth. This means that many humanists work to promote and protect human rights and equality, and to oppose prejudice and discrimination, all over the world.

If 'humanism' means anything at all, it must surely embrace respect and concern for all human beings, whether they are members of our own family or group or society or are people on the other side of the world whom we do not know and will never meet. It means a responsiveness to the needs of all with whom we share a common humanity.



Richard Norman, humanist philosopher

Similarities and differences

'We are all by nature born similarly in every respect... We all breathe into the air through our mouths and nostrils... We take in sounds with our hearing, we see by means of light with our vision, we work with our hands, we walk with our feet.' Antiphon, 5th century BCE

Humanists accept the scientific evidence that human beings are all members of the same species. We share many feelings, needs, and values. Humanists believe that this can help us to see that we should try to provide all people with equal opportunities to live well.

Humanists also recognise that people are different. We have different backgrounds, passions, and beliefs. They therefore believe we should work for a world in which everyone has the freedom to be themselves (as long as they don't cause harm to others).

Generations of humanists have campaigned for equality and against discrimination, condemning racism, and supporting women's and LGBT rights. They campaigned against slavery and colonialism and organised the first global anti-racism congress in 1911. They advocated for civil rights, girls' education, women's suffrage, and same-sex marriage.

The core values of modern humanism are set out in the Amsterdam Declaration, including:

- 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.

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Shared humanity

Humanists often speak about how we should always try to see other people as human beings first, rather than dividing people up into different categories based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, or religion or belief. This has long been a feature of non-religious thinking.



'My country is the world,
and my religion is to do
good.'

Thomas Paine (1737-1809),
Enlightenment writer
and revolutionary



'The truth of humanity is that
we are one, whilst we are
different. We must oppose any
who seek to divide and
dehumanise us.'

Alice Roberts,
Vice President of Humanists UK

'As a woman, I have no
country. As a woman, I
want no country. As a
woman, my country is the
whole world.'

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941),
humanist and author



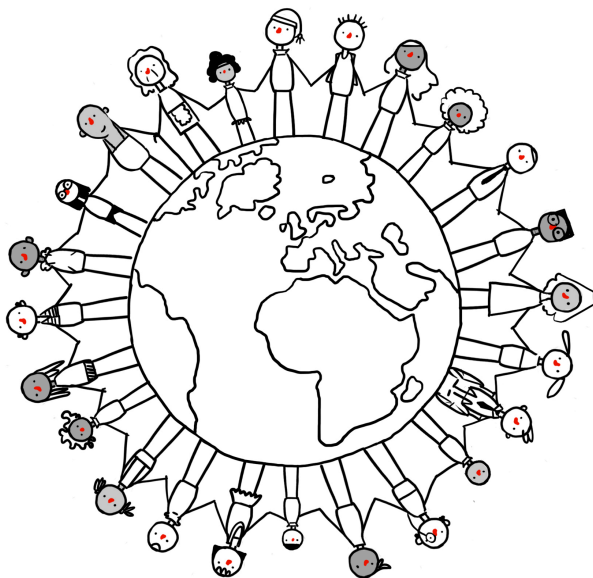
'Science has shown that all
human beings belong to the
same species, so we should
respect each other.'

Lola Tinubu, Association
of Black Humanists



'Being a humanist means
being a person that puts
human beings first, that
doesn't look at humans in
terms of their religions, their
tribes, or their races, that
looks at people because they
are human beings like you.'

Kato Mukasa,
Uganda Humanist Association



'We are far more united and
have far more in common with
each other than things that
divide us.'

Jo Cox (1974-2016),
humanist and politician



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What is a fair society?

Imagine you were asked to cut up a cake and share it between yourself and three strangers. Some of us might be tempted to cut a bigger slice for ourselves. Now imagine that, after cutting, you did not know which slice you would receive. This would motivate many of us to make sure we divided the cake up evenly.



The philosopher **John Rawls** applied this idea to society. He asked us to imagine we were designing a society but we did not know what position we would hold in it once it had been created. We did not know what our gender, race, or sexual orientation would be. We did not know whether we would be healthy or sick, or suffer from any disabilities. We did not know whether our parents would be rich or poor, or religious or non-religious. We did not even know what our tastes, passions, interests, and beliefs would be. Rawls described this as being placed behind a **veil of ignorance**.



Rawls believed that this condition would lead us to designing a truly fair society. By not wishing to disadvantage ourselves, we would need to ensure that no one was disadvantaged.

'A just society is a society that if you knew everything about it, you'd be willing to enter it in a random place.'

John Rawls,
A Theory of Justice



What would we want?

Rawls believed that from behind the veil of ignorance we would all want **individual freedom** and **equality of opportunity**. Equality of opportunity does not mean that everyone has exactly the same. For example, it does not mean everyone should earn the same amount of money whatever job they do. But it means that society should not unfairly disadvantage or discriminate against particular people (e.g. on the basis of gender, race, belief, or sexuality).



'Sex and race, because they are easy, visible differences, have been the primary ways of organising human beings into superior and inferior groups...'

We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen, or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.'

Gloria Steinem, feminist and political activist

Do you agree with the following statement?

'If you had to choose one moment in history in which to be born, and you didn't know in advance whether you were going to be male or female, which country you were going to be from, what your status was, you'd choose right now.'

Barack Obama, former President of the USA

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What is prejudice and discrimination?

Prejudice occurs when we judge other people or groups unfairly based on limited knowledge. This often leads to unfair discrimination.

Unfair discrimination is when we use unimportant or irrelevant differences to make choices that negatively affect other people. For example, denying people equal rights to things such as education, employment, or access to services.

Sometimes we perceive everyone in a group in a particular way (often incorrectly), rather than recognising them as individuals. This is called **stereotyping**.

People can be discriminated against in a variety of ways. The Equality Act (2010) means that, today, a great deal of discrimination is against the law. This includes discrimination on the grounds of age, gender reassignment, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. These are called **protected characteristics**.



Do religions discriminate?

Many humanists believe religious institutions are sometimes guilty of unfair discrimination against groups including women, LGBT people, non-religious people, and those from other religions. Humanists support freedom of religion and belief, but campaign to challenge religious practices that they believe cause harm, just as they might challenge other cases of inequality or the denial of human rights and freedoms.

Why do prejudice and discrimination exist?

Human beings like to feel part of a group. Sometimes, in order to achieve this, they put up barriers to protect the group identity and keep outsiders out. Many groups, tribes, and nations have done this throughout human history. We naturally evolved a tendency to be afraid, or at least suspicious, of anything or anyone new or different. However, the fact that this instinct is natural doesn't mean that it is right. Humanists believe we have other natural capacities, such as **empathy** and **reason**, that can help us to see beyond our tribal instincts.

There are also many social causes of prejudice and discrimination: these can include our experiences and our upbringing; the influence of the media; and political or status-based incentives. These social factors can exaggerate any natural prejudices we already hold. We all suffer from implicit biases (unconscious judgements) towards those who are different from ourselves.

Social factors can, however, be made to work the other way. Education can help to reduce the ignorance and fears that can lead to prejudice. Learning about people all over the world can enable us to see the similarities between us, helping us to question our assumptions on the basis of **evidence**. Many humanists believe that personal contact and building connections between people who are different from us is one of the best ways to reduce discrimination.



'Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they do not know each other; they do not know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated.'

Asa Philip Randolph (1889–1979),
American civil rights leader

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Gender equality: education

Humanists and non-religious people have long campaigned for equal rights for women, particularly in education, marriage law, and the political process.

The writer and advocate for women's rights **Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759–1797) is often admired by humanists. Her novels challenged what she viewed as the patriarchal institution of marriage and featured women having passionate and romantic friendships outside of marriage with men and women. She wanted women to be more than just wives and instead to be better 'companions' to their husbands.



'Make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives; - that is, if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.'

In 1792 she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she argued for women to have the same fundamental rights as men, in particular the right to be educated so that they might think for themselves and truly achieve what they were capable of.

'I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.'

Émilie du Châtelet (1706–1749) was a scientist who translated the works of Isaac Newton into French. She also wrote critically about religion (particularly the treatment of women in the Bible), and on how to live a happy life, emphasising the value of learning and intellectual pleasures.



'If I were king, I would redress an abuse which cuts back, as it were, one half of human kind. I would have women participate in all human rights, especially those of the mind.'

Many humanists have campaigned for inclusive education, including **Alice Woods** (1849–1941), who was a headteacher. She advocated that boys and girls should be educated together. Like many other humanists of her time, Woods' focus was the preparation of the next generation for living compassionately and cooperatively with one another, developing a sense of responsibility and morality to help build a fairer and better society.



The philosopher **John Stuart Mill** (1806–1873) argued in *The Subjection of Women* that the education of women was for the good of society as a whole. While historians credit him as the sole author of his works, Mill himself was keen to emphasise his indebtedness to his wife **Harriet Taylor Mill** and daughter **Helen Taylor**.

Today, many humanists across the world work to support women's rights and girls' education. Aware Girls is an organisation founded by humanist **Gulalai Ismail** that campaigns for women's rights and education, and against violence and discrimination against women in Pakistan. It raises awareness among young women about their rights, campaigns for all girls to be able to attend school, and empowers women to take charge of their own lives and change their communities. Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai was one of the many young women who has taken part in the programme.

'My girl cousin was 15 when her marriage was arranged to someone twice her age; she couldn't finish her education while my boy cousins were doing so. Girls have internalised all this discrimination. At Aware Girls, we teach them how to have control over their own lives, and that women have human rights too.'



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Gender equality: women's suffrage

Many humanists were involved in campaigning for voting rights for women (women's suffrage) in the late 19th and early 20th century.

One of the most active early advocates for women's suffrage was **Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy** (1833–1918). She formed a women's suffrage committee in Manchester, which helped to usher in a nationwide network of suffrage societies. In 1889, she became Secretary of the Women's Franchise League, where she campaigned tirelessly for a woman's right to vote. Wolstenholme Elmy lived to see the introduction of limited women's suffrage but died, on 12 March 1918, before she could cast her own vote. Fellow activist for women's suffrage Emmeline Pankhurst described Wolstenholme Elmy as the 'brains behind the suffragette movement'.



Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy with Emmeline Pankhurst

The philosopher **John Stuart Mill** was an advocate of women's rights. He presented the first mass women's suffrage petition to Parliament in 1866.



'Women have won the vote, let them see to it that it is used to forward the highest interests of humanity.'

Millicent Mackenzie (1863–1942)
Vice President of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK)



The Women's Freedom League had a strongly humanist element. It was co-founded by humanist Teresa Billington-Greig (1876–1964), and many of its members were also connected to the ethical societies (precursors of present day humanist groups). The Women's Freedom League envisioned emancipation for women beyond merely gaining the vote, campaigning on the slogan 'Dare to be free'. It recognised in particular the challenges of working class women, and sought sweeping societal reform, campaigning for full equality.

'I desire to see woman free and human; I seek the complete emancipation from all shackles of law and custom, from all chains of sentiment and superstition.'

Teresa Billington-Greig

'Let me be counted among the citizens of the world who own no barriers of race or nation, whose hopes are set on the golden age of universal fraternity we believe to come.'



Campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960) refused to differentiate between people on the grounds of sex, class, or colour, and, in 1912, abandoned her artistic career in favour of politics. She built an independent women's suffrage movement in London's docklands, was

repeatedly arrested while campaigning for the vote, and, in solidarity with other suffragettes, went on hunger strike in prison and was force-fed. However, she opposed the increasing violence employed by the suffragette movement, believing that the best way forward lay in creating a mass movement of women campaigning together with men for universal adult suffrage.

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Gender equality: marriage and divorce law

Humanists support **equality** and individual **freedoms**. They therefore advocate for freedom of choice over who, or whether, we marry and for equal partnership in relationships, believing women should not have fixed roles, and should have the freedom to build a life and career outside the home. Decisions about the division of labour in any couple should be the result of discussion between both people.

'We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.'"

Betty Friedan (1921–2006),
feminist and activist

In 1869 the philosopher **John Stuart Mill** wrote *The Subjugation of Women* on the challenges women faced inside a Victorian marriage. He critiqued how girls were indoctrinated by the claim that 'marriage was the true profession of women'. In 1851, in opposition to the existing marriage contract that meant a husband controlled all his wife's financial assets, Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor (1807–1858) agreed that they were equal partners, sharing their financial assets and respecting each other's rights.

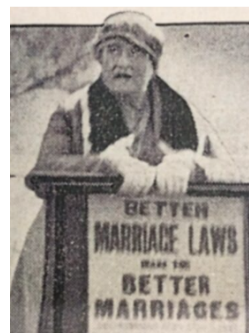
Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy also campaigned to abolish 'coverture', a legal doctrine which made a married woman's property that of her husband.

Many 19th and early 20th century humanists – some of them members of what were then called 'ethical societies' – pioneered the concept of the '**ethical wedding**' service. In such weddings, the duty of a wife to 'obey' was omitted, thereby establishing an equality between the partners committing to each other.

Humanists have also long supported liberal divorce laws that allow both men and women the freedom to escape an unhappy marriage. Generally, they believe that if a couple is experiencing difficulties, then they should seek to resolve their problems and others should do their best to support them. However, sometimes divorce can be the best option and so the law should not make it difficult to separate, nor discriminate against one party.

Humanists campaigned for the divorce laws we have today. **May Seaton-Tiedeman** (1862–1948), was a lifelong activist with the Divorce Law Reform Union, arguing for 'better marriage laws for better marriages'. She campaigned for a rational, reasoned approach to marriage and divorce, rooted in compassion not tradition.

Her work was pivotal in changes to the law in 1937 that extended the grounds for divorce from adultery only, to include cruelty, desertion, and incurable insanity. She, however, continued to campaign for further changes to the law to allow other grounds for divorce.



'If the basic cause of an unsuccessful marriage is removable, conciliation is the proper procedure. If it is not removable, elementary justice and common sense demands that the pair should be divorced.'

May Seaton-Tiedeman

Zona Vallance

(1860–1904) was a founding figure of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK). She argued that men and women should be equal partners in the home.



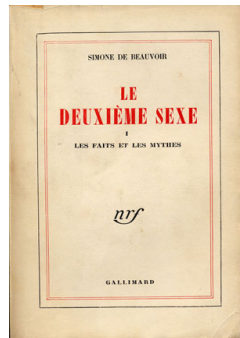
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Gender equality: feminism

Many humanists and non-religious people have been prominent in the feminist movement, advocating for the equality of the sexes and combating prejudice and discrimination.

In her 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, feminist writer and humanist thinker **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–1986) condemned the systematic oppression of women, arguing that society often viewed them only in relation to men, rather than recognising them as free and autonomous individuals.



More recently, in the 1960s, humanists played a significant role in second-wave feminism in the United States, championing women's reproductive, employment, and political rights. **Gloria Steinem** is a journalist and feminist activist who has also supported other humanist causes such as legalising same-sex marriage and advocating for the rights of transgender people.

'This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. Sex and race because they are easy and visible differences have been the primary ways of organizing human beings into superior and inferior groups... We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.'



'The feminist revolution had to be fought because women quite simply were stopped at a state of evolution far short of their human capacity.'

Betty Friedan (1921–2006),
feminist writer and activist

Humanist support for feminist causes continued into the 21st century



Sikivu Hutchinson is an American author, playwright, director, and musician. She writes and campaigns on issues around feminism, racial equality, and LGBT rights. She has fought, in particular, for the rights and freedoms of women of colour, including against domestic violence. In 2020 she won the Harvard Humanist of the Year award.

In literature too, humanists have advanced arguments for feminism and against patriarchal systems. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, humanist author **Margaret Atwood** portrays a society in which women have lost their freedom. The novel explores how women's rights are suppressed and how women try to regain their independence.



'I genuinely believe that society would be more at ease with itself – men and women – if we had equality. I am partly a feminist because of my son: I don't want him to have to 'man up'; to not cry; to feel as if he has to carry the burden of the world. I'd like him to share it.'



Sandi Toksvig, writer
and patron of Humanists UK

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Ernestine Rose

Abolitionist, suffragist, freethinker



‘Emancipation from every kind of bondage is my principle. I go for the recognition of human rights, without distinction of sect, party, sex, or colour.’

Ernestine Louise Potowski was born 13 January 1810 in Piotrkow, Poland, the daughter of an orthodox rabbi. While still a teenager, following the death of her mother, her father attempted to arrange a marriage for Ernestine, who rejected his chosen suitor (a much older man) and successfully sued her father for control of her inheritance. Sceptical of religion from an early age, Ernestine studied Judaism carefully before rejecting it while still young. She remained an outspoken atheist for the rest of her life, and held many humanist beliefs and values, arguing above all for the right to freedom of thought and discussion, and the natural equality of all human beings.

In 1827, at 17, she left Poland, travelling across Europe before arriving in London in 1830, where she married William Ella Rose in a civil ceremony.

The couple emigrated to America in 1836, where Rose quickly embarked on a tireless campaign for reform – lecturing widely in favour of the abolition of slavery, and for women’s rights, including their property rights in marriage and the right to vote. Both hinged on an unflinching belief that every person was entitled to the same human rights. The fairest and most humane laws, Rose believed, were those rooted in reason, underpinned by compassion, and arrived at through open discussion.

‘Humanity, morality, and justice to man and woman, and non-interference with each person’s private opinions—for these ends we must work. We belong to the same human family, and we must work for it. Our life is short, and we cannot spare an hour from the human race, even for all the gods in creation.’

Ernestine Rose died on 4 August 1892 and was buried at Highgate Cemetery. Her friend and colleague, the activist and social reformer Susan B. Anthony felt that Rose was too ahead of her time to be truly appreciated in it.

‘Mrs. Ernestine Rose – when age and infirmity brought her near to death, recalled the perils and triumphs in which she had shared, the slave she had helped to set free from the bondage of ownership, and the slave minds she had set free from the bondage of authority; she was cheered, and exclaimed: “But I have lived.”’

George Jacob Holyoake (1896)

‘Mrs Rose has fought a double battle; not only for the political rights of her sex as women, but for their religious rights as individual souls; to do their own thinking and believing.’

Susan B. Anthony (1881)

heritage.humanists.uk/ernestine-rose

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LGBT equality

When considering questions about how we ought to treat people and organise society, humanists try to apply **evidence** and **empathy** to inform their decisions. This is supported by their respect for **personal autonomy** and **human rights**, and a desire to support people's wellbeing. They believe that this is the one life we have and that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find **happiness** in the here and now.

Humanists see nothing to condemn and everything to celebrate in people living out their lives in a consensual and fulfilling way based on their sexuality or gender identity. They recognise that there is nothing 'unnatural' about being LGBT, and that our sexual preferences are a product of our biology rather than a choice.

The philosopher **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832) had a very humanist approach to ethics, rejecting belief in a god and believing we needed to work out morality for ourselves. He believed being good was about trying to bring about the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. In 1785 he wrote the first known argument for homosexual law reform in England, arguing that gay sex harms no one. However, it was not published in his own lifetime.

'It is evident that it produces no pain in anyone. On the contrary it produces pleasure... For what is there in it for anybody to be afraid of?'



Humanists have long been champions of LGBT rights. Since 1979, **LGBT Humanists** has campaigned for equality and against discrimination. It has provided a cherished space for LGBT individuals, as well as people who might be queer, intersex, asexual, or otherwise part of the broader LGBT+ umbrella. Today many humanist individuals and organisations remain at the forefront of the struggle for LGBT equality. Humanists UK campaigned for same-sex marriage, against conversion therapy, and for LGBT inclusive relationships and sex education in schools. It also campaigned to make it easier for people to have a change of gender legally recognised.

'Humanism asserts the equality of all human beings so, however a person identifies in their sexual orientation, we act with empathy to support their wellbeing so they can flourish. Humanism affirms the autonomy of people to live their own meaningful lives so we work hard to reduce prejudice and discrimination and promote LGBT+ rights.'

Nick Baldwin, LGBT Humanists Coordinator



The first President of LGBT Humanists, **Maureen Duffy** was the first gay woman in British public life to be open about her sexuality. Her courage and her fight for lesbian visibility helped transform gay and lesbian acceptance in the UK, breaking down barriers and prejudice, and giving confidence to other gay women like her to do the same.



'We're part of society, part of the world whether we or society like it or not, and we have to learn to live in the world and the world has to live with us.'

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Humanist campaigning for LGBT rights

Legalising homosexuality

Humanists and non-religious people were instrumental in achieving the legalisation of homosexuality in the UK. In the 1950s, the Wolfenden Committee reviewed the UK's laws on homosexuality. As part of this process, the Ethical Union (now Humanists UK) submitted evidence to the committee arguing that homosexual acts between consenting adults should be decriminalised. After the Wolfenden Report was published in 1957, the Ethical Union – and a number of prominent humanists including A.J. Ayer, Julian Huxley, and Eustace Chesser – pushed for the report's recommendations to be implemented. In 1967, humanist and politician Leo Abse played a key role in finally getting the law passed.



Conversion therapy

Conversion therapy is a pseudoscientific practice aimed at changing someone's sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender identity. Humanists UK campaigns for it to be banned. Conversion therapy subjects LGBT people to practices ranging from harmful psychological treatments to extreme measures like forced marriage. Consequences can include lasting mental trauma, self-harm, and even suicide. In 2018, the government announced that it will change the law to ban conversion therapy practices. However, this ban has not yet been brought into law, so the campaign continues.

Same sex marriage

In 2014, same-sex marriage was introduced in England, Scotland, and Wales, and in 2020 it was introduced in Northern Ireland. Humanists UK was a founding member of the Coalition for Equal Marriage, the coalition of groups that worked to secure this legislation, and was thanked for its work during the final debate when the Bill was passed. For decades, humanists had seen the denial of this equal right as a form of discrimination, believing all people should be treated equally, and society should recognise that what is most important in a relationship is whether the people love each other and commit to supporting each other.

'This Bill rightly allows gay couples to make the powerful public statement of love and commitment that marriage proclaims. Of course same-sex marriage will not eliminate prejudice or discrimination, but it will certainly hasten the day when homosexuality is accepted as a wholly natural state... This brave Bill brings us one historic step closer to a better world and I wholeheartedly support it.'

Lord Birt, humanist and peer,
on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill

Humanist celebrants provided same-sex couples with commitment ceremonies long before equal marriage was recognised in law. Several of the first same-sex couples to marry in England were humanists, including Peter McGraith and David Cabreza who married just after midnight on 29 March 2014 at Islington Town Hall, and the first same-sex marriage in Scotland was a humanist marriage carried out by humanist celebrant Ross Wright.

'What I like so much about the humanist approach is that there is no discrimination in who shall choose to marry... it's the fact that they have chosen each other. That's what matters.'

Simon Dinwiddy, humanist celebrant

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Challenging racism



When considering questions about how we ought to treat people and organise society, humanists try to apply **evidence** and **empathy** to inform their decisions. This is supported by their respect for **personal autonomy** and **human rights**, and a desire to support people's wellbeing. They believe that this is the **one life** we have and that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find **happiness** in the here and now.

This means that, throughout history, many humanists and non-religious people have fought for **equality**, and against discrimination and prejudice of all kinds. This has included humanist abolitionists who campaigned for an end to slavery; anti-colonial activists who stood for the rights of oppressed peoples; internationalists who sought greater cooperation and understanding between countries; civil rights activists who fought apartheid and segregation; and contemporary humanists across the globe, who denounce racism and champion equality for all.

The current President of Humanists UK Adam Rutherford is the author of *How to Argue with a Racist* in which he uses the science of genetics to challenge the concept of race. However his argument is also backed up by his humanist ethics: 'Racism is not wrong because it's based on scientifically specious ideas. Racism is wrong, because it's an affront to human dignity.'

'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.'

Amsterdam Declaration,
Humanists International (2022)

'Sometimes we think, 'how can I possibly change all this?' And sometimes you can't. But what you can do is make sure wherever you go, people know where you stand. They know that you're an anti-racist. You become a beacon of light that way. You become someone who makes other people want to be anti-racist too.'

John Amechi, psychologist
and patron of Humanists UK



'Once I separated from religion and fully embraced the humanist ideal that people must take care of each other because we're all we have, the urge to engage in social justice activism became too strong to ignore.'

Candace Gorham, Vice President
of the American Humanist Association



'As I entered high school, I embraced humanism wholeheartedly, and began fighting for justice for all people on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation and disability. I decided to stop waiting for someone or something to change the world, and instead be that change myself.'

Lydia Mason, education consultant



"I hope that people will finally come to realize that there is only one 'race' – the human race – and that we are all members of it."

Margaret Atwood, author and humanist

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A history of humanist & non-religious campaigning against racism

The abolition of slavery

Ernestine Rose (1810–1892) lectured across America in the mid-19th century in favour of the abolition of slavery, based on her belief that every person was entitled to the same human rights. Rose believed the law should be rooted in reason and compassion.



‘Emancipation from every kind of bondage is my principle. I go for the recognition of human rights, without distinction of sect, party, sex, or colour.’

Ernestine Rose



The freethinker **Robert Wedderburn** (1762–1835) was born in Jamaica, the son of an enslaved woman and a Scottish sugar planter. In the late 18th century he moved to London and became an anti-slavery activist.

One of the only buildings in the UK built by and for non-religious people, Conway Hall, is named after **Moncure Conway** (1832–1907). Conway was born in 1832 in the USA and spent his life campaigning against slavery. As well as writing, he wanted to take action and do something practical and so, in 1862, with his wife Ellen, he led 31 slaves from Virginia in the South to Ohio in the North, where they could be set free.

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) escaped from slavery in 1838 and went on to become a national leader for abolition: ‘I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.’

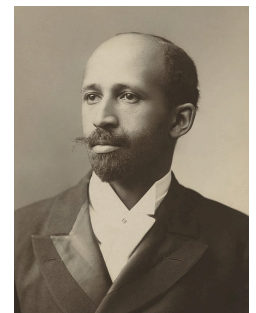


Principal delegates of the First Universal Races Congress

First Universal Races Congress, 1911

International cooperation has always been a central focus of humanist organisations. In 1911 the secretary of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK) Gustav Spiller was the principal organiser of the First Universal Races Congress¹. This was a pioneering attempt to challenge racial divisions in the light of social and scientific understanding, bringing people together from over 50 nations.

One delegate was the sociologist, activist, and freethinker **W.E.B. Du Bois** (1868–1963), a leading figure in the American civil rights movement who had been one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. Du Bois



wrote that the event was the ‘first time in the history of mankind when a world congress dared openly and explicitly to take its stand on the platform of human equality and took steps toward the perfection of a world organization for interracial concord, investigation and co-operation,’ and that ‘Every word uttered, every step taken by this Congress is in direct opposition to the dominant philosophy of race hatred’. Unfortunately the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 meant the First Universal Races Congress was also the last.

¹ heritage.humanists.uk/first-universal-races-congress

Humanist Perspective

Prejudice and discrimination

The civil rights movement

Prominent African American humanists played important roles in the civil rights movement in the United States, aiming to abolish racial segregation and discrimination.

Asa Philip Randolph (1889–1979) was a humanist civil rights leader who campaigned for racial equality in the workplace. He organised the March on Washington in 1963 at which

Martin Luther King delivered his 'I have a dream' speech.



'This condition of freedom, equality, and democracy is not the gift of gods. It is the task of men, yes, men, brave men, honest men, determined men.'

James Baldwin (1924–1987) was a novelist, activist, and humanist. As well as being one of America's most revered writers, Baldwin played a prominent role in the civil rights movement, becoming internationally known for his resistance to oppression in all its forms, whether on grounds of race, class, sex, or sexuality – acknowledging our shared humanity and responsibilities towards each other.



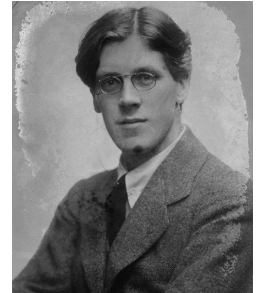
'The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was before you came in.'



Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) was an American playwright, civil rights activist, and humanist. She used her writing, as well as her activism, to take a stand against racism.

Anti-colonialism

Fenner Brockway (1888–1988) was a politician, writer and activist, who is perhaps best-known for his work in campaigning for world peace and an end to racial inequality. He was instrumental in forming the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) – a British anti-colonialist group created to champion the right of colonial peoples to self-governance.



Eslanda Goode Robeson (1895–1965) was an American anthropologist, author, actor, and civil rights activist. She became a prominent voice for African self-determination and decolonisation. In 1941, she co-founded the Council on African Affairs, an African American group formed to

lobby against colonialism in Africa, and represented the group at the founding convention of the United Nations in 1945.

'I know I cannot have any real freedom all by myself. I can't have it unless everybody has it.'

Kader Asmal (1934–2011) was a South African politician, professor, and human rights activist. He was a co-founder of both the



British and Irish anti-apartheid movements, working for an end to discrimination against non-white people in South Africa. When apartheid ended, he helped to shape the country's new constitution.

Humanist Perspective

Prejudice and discrimination

Discrimination against the non-religious around the globe



'Humanists are the invisible people of the 21st century... While almost everybody is persecuted when they are in a minority, the attacks on humanists are particularly violent... and, for many of them, the family is not a safe place.'

Ahmed Shaheed,
United Nations Special Rapporteur on
freedom of religion or belief

Humanists and other non-religious people face prejudice and discrimination on the basis of their beliefs across the world. Over 70% of people in the world live in countries that discriminate against the non-religious, including those where being non-religious is an 'offence' punishable by imprisonment or even death.



'The most stark challenge that's faced by humanists around the world is the right to even exist... Apostasy is the idea that by leaving or rejecting a religion you've committed an offence and this deserves to be punished... This is something that's

completely against international human rights law. It's something Humanists International campaigns strongly against at the United Nations and around the world, but these laws do exist and we've seen many examples of people who have been imprisoned, tortured, and sadly killed, all for expressing a right to change or to hold new beliefs.'

Gary McLelland,
Humanists International

Freedom of thought

Humanists International campaigns for equal treatment of everybody regardless of their religion or belief. The Oxford Declaration was adopted by Humanists International in 2014 to assert humanist support for the rights to freedom of thought and expression. Every year it publishes *The Freedom of Thought Report*, which assesses every country in the world on the basis of human rights, and on discrimination against humanists and the non-religious.

Blasphemy laws

Many humanists believe that people should be free to challenge and criticise religion.



Blasphemy laws deny people this freedom of expression. They can be used to silence the voice of the non-religious and even, in some cases, control any form of dissent against a government. Blasphemy laws exist in 89 countries across the globe. In seven countries, a convicted 'blasphemer' may be sentenced to death, and a further 63 countries prescribe prison sentences. Humanists International's *End Blasphemy Laws* campaign is a global campaign to repeal blasphemy laws.

Humanists at risk

Humanists International supports humanists in countries where their beliefs are considered to be crimes. They offer advice and help them to escape and relocate to places where they are no longer in danger, and then put them in contact with a community which is able to support them. Humanists UK supports non-religious people seeking asylum in the UK if returning to their country of origin would put their safety at risk.

For more about the impact of discrimination against humanists around the world see understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Humanists-in-danger.pdf

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Discrimination against humanists and the non-religious in the UK

While being non-religious carries few risks in the UK, there are still ways that humanists and other non-religious people can find themselves subject to prejudice and discrimination.

Humanists will typically be **secularists**. That means they believe that no single religious or non-religious worldview should hold a privileged position or have any special power or influence over the state's decision making. The UK is not a secular state: The Church of England is its state church and 26 bishops sit in the House of Lords by right, giving the church a privileged influence within parliament. Also, those MPs who attend prayers at the beginning of parliamentary sessions are more likely to get seats and hence be asked to contribute to debates.



Bishops in parliament

Faith schools

Non-religious people, such as humanists, also face discrimination as a result of the admissions processes of faith schools in the UK. Currently around a third of all state-funded schools are faith schools and are legally allowed to choose their pupils on the basis of religion, as well as using religious belief as a discriminating factor when employing staff. The non-religious are therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to applying for places at these schools. Humanists campaign to change these discriminatory practices and promote an inclusive education which allows young people of all backgrounds to learn alongside each other.

Marriage

Humanist marriages are non-religious ceremonies crafted to reflect the values of the couple and conducted by a humanist celebrant who shares the couple's beliefs and values. Humanist marriages are legally recognised in Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, humanists who wish to have a humanist wedding in England or Wales must also have a separate civil wedding ceremony in order for their marriage to be legally recognised, incurring additional costs and burden. The law in England and Wales is therefore discriminatory against humanists. They are treated differently from those who wish to marry in a church.

Pastoral care

Pastoral care is provided for people in hospitals and prisons to support them in times of need. Traditionally this has always been provided by the Church of England. However, many non-religious people wish to speak to a like-minded person rather than to somebody who does not share their beliefs. Campaigning by Humanists UK led to the creation of the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network. However such a service is only available in just over a third of hospitals and 10% of prisons.

Apostates

People who have left a religion, sometimes called 'apostates' can face discrimination and prejudice within their community. In the case of some high-control religious groups, apostates are sometimes seen as bringing shame and dishonour to a family, and as a result they may experience emotional and physical abuse. This can include shunning, and sometimes complete disownment, from immediate family and their wider community. In the UK, Faith to Faithless campaigns to raise awareness of apostasy, provides support and community for those who have left a religion, and provides training for individuals and organisations who might come into contact with them.

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