

# Humanist Perspective

## Community



### Why might humanists value community?

As the word 'humanism' might imply, **connections** with other people are very important to humanists. Believing this is the **one life** we have, they place importance on finding happiness in the here and now. Human beings evolved as social animals and therefore often crave the company of others. Isolation can be harmful to our wellbeing and other people can bring support in times of need. However, freedom of choice over the communities we join and belong to is also important to humanists.

- **Mutual support:** Life can be difficult sometimes. Humanists don't believe in a god or that help will come from outside humanity. A strong community can provide a support network. People can celebrate with you during the good times and help you through the bad. It's about knowing you're not alone.
- **Shared values and action:** Humanists want to make a positive impact. By coming together with others, they can work more effectively to work for causes they support.
- **Celebrating life:** Humanists believe this is the only life we have, so it should be celebrated. Communities provide a way to mark important life events together - like weddings, the birth of a baby, and funerals.
- **Personal growth:** Being part of a community can expose us to new experiences, other people, and different perspectives. It helps us to learn, grow, and develop empathy for others.

### When can community be problematic?

**Bonding** between people with shared beliefs is often important to us as it provides a support network, but it can be dangerous if it leads to division from groups who might hold different beliefs. Many humanists worry if bonding leads to an 'us vs. them' mentality.

As well as many positive ethical instincts, human beings have evolved a propensity to tribalism. This highlights and sometimes distorts differences from others to try to bind communities together. This in-group loyalty (perhaps even more than selfish behaviour) is the cause of much of the conflict and harm we see in society and around the world today.

**Bridging** is therefore also important - building connections *between* communities. We need to reach out to those who are different from us, not necessarily to agree on everything, but to better understand each other, find common values where they exist, and to work together for a more peaceful society. Humanism places a strong emphasis on our **shared humanity** - the idea that we are all one human family, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or beliefs. Some humanists can therefore be found engaging in **dialogue** work, seeking opportunities to engage in conversation with religious people.

'[Humanism] does generate a view of the value of community, and of the particular kinds of communities which are important in meeting human needs. It enables us to welcome the diversity of overlapping communities which is characteristic of modern societies. It celebrates the need to think for yourself along with the need to belong, to bond but also to bridge, to listen to, talk to and engage with others who think differently.'

Richard Norman, *What is humanism for?*

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### Where might humanists find community?

While there are ample opportunities for humanists to gather together with other humanists, not all will do so in any organised sense, and there is certainly no obligation. Many humanists get all the community they need from family, friends, and work. Others find community through the many ways human beings group together under shared interests and goals, such as sport, music, volunteering, or campaigning for change, often with people who might not share their worldview.

#### Humanists UK

Humanists UK has over 130,000 members and supporters. The organisation runs an annual convention that brings together hundreds of humanists from all over the country to listen to talks and engage in conversation. This event has recently been held in Sheffield, Cardiff, and Liverpool. The event is open to anyone who wishes to attend. Everyone is welcome.

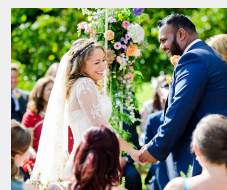


#### Global communities

Community can be very important for humanists in parts of the world where being non-religious puts people's liberty and safety at risk. Here, humanist groups can be of great value to people who might feel afraid to speak publicly about their beliefs. Humanists International has member organisations in over 60 countries and holds an annual congress that brings humanists together from all over the world.

#### Humanist ceremonies

Many humanists mark important moments in life such as births, weddings, and funerals, sharing the experience with friends and family.



#### Other forms of humanist community

Special humanist groups exist for people working in particular sectors, such as Defence Humanists for people in the armed forces; humanists with a shared identity, such as LGBT Humanists or the Association of Black Humanists; and humanists with shared goals, such as Humanist Climate Action.

*'No man is an island. I know that's a cliché, but it's actually true when you think about humanism. It's that collective thought, that I can go to my fellow Association of Black Humanists and go, I have a dilemma, what do I do? It's that collectiveness, that you're not alone.'*



Audrey Simmons, humanist

#### Freedom of choice

Humanists believe that we should be free to choose the communities to which we belong. That means people should be free to leave any group that they do not feel comfortable being part of. Nobody should be bound to a particular community.

Sometimes when people change their beliefs, they are forcefully rejected from a community. That community might have provided them with a home, a job, and a family. Faith to Faithless is a programme run by Humanists UK that supports ex-religious people who find themselves in such a situation. It provides a community of people who have faced similar experiences as well as support with building a new life.

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### Local humanist groups

There are around 50 local humanist groups in the UK, and the number is rising. These provide an opportunity for humanists to gather and enjoy conversation and company. A humanist local group event will often involve a speaker on a topic of interest and a discussion. Sometimes, however, they are simply a social occasion – perhaps involving a walk in a park or site of natural beauty, or sharing food and drink.



#### Anthony Lewis, Windsor Humanists

Having spent 30 years travelling the world working, I found myself working from home. I found this new existence fulfilling but isolating, and realised that I had never really made any friends in my local Windsor area. I missed being part of a community.



We decided to set up a humanist group in our local area. It's been a great success story for us personally as we have made some real, like-minded friends in the local area, who we would not have met any other way. It's also been a success in other ways; both of us feel more connected with the wider religious and political community through being involved locally with humanism.

Windsor Humanists are active members of the two local interfaith groups. We are part of an initiative to support the religious and non-religious to work together to help foster dialogue and friendship between different communities.

Through getting involved with Windsor Humanists, I feel much more connected to my local area and community in ways I could never have envisaged when I started this journey. Local groups go a long way to meeting the deep need within us all, as human beings, to belong.

#### Sarah Jones, Chester Humanists

Our members belong to our humanist group because it enables discussion and social engagements with like-minded people, something that many of us have struggled to find elsewhere. We are a supportive group of people and our conversations are important to us, because we share a similar worldview and similar values. This understanding creates a space for humanists to express their feelings or concerns, ask questions, and learn from each other.



We hold monthly meetings, which can sometimes be a speaker on a defined subject or a general discussion evening, and we also host socials in pubs and family walks.

What is becoming more important to us as a group is our connection and involvement with our local community. We are the organisers for the Chester Great Get Together (a celebration of what we all have in common in remembrance of Jo Cox MP). We have just started a Death Café (a space for people to gather and discuss death with a view to helping them make the most of their lives). We also have plans to deliver a monthly Sunday Gathering, which will offer an opportunity to connect with other humanists (but you don't have to be a humanist to come!) and enjoy a meaningful connection through music, poetry, and conversation.

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### A history of humanist community

Throughout history, humanists have not always easily been able to gather with others who shared their beliefs. For many hundreds of years, when atheism or accusations of blasphemy could result in punishment, it would have been dangerous for people with humanist ideas to meet publicly. However, during the 19th century, organised groups of non-religious people did begin to form.

For those who were part of them, these humanist communities (often not labelled 'humanist') provided opportunities to meet likeminded people, enjoy discussions and events, hold ceremonies, and make their voices heard as a collective.



Members of the Leicester Secular Society, 19th century

### Expressing and exploring beliefs

Gathering together with others allowed people with humanist ideas to explore and express their own beliefs, whether by listening to a lecture, singing secular songs, or even holding special ceremonies. One example of this kind of community was the Owenites: followers of Robert Owen (1771–1858), who believed in working for a more equal society, and in a 'rational religion' based on human needs. In 1849, one Owenite group held a naming ceremony for the baby son of publisher Edward Truelove, which called upon the community to help raise him with values of honesty, kindness, and freedom of thought. These kinds of ceremonies helped create a sense of community rooted in shared beliefs and values.

### The Ethical Societies

The 19th century saw the birth of different kinds of humanist groups, including positivist societies (whose 'religion of humanity' celebrated the achievements of human beings); secular societies (rooted in the philosophy of 'secularism', which at the time meant 'the promotion of happiness in this world'); and the ethical societies, many of which would come together to become Humanists UK.

While the early ethical societies were often a space for non-religious people, they were not exclusive. Their goal was to bring people together who wanted to collaborate to do good. The first ethical society in the UK was the London Ethical Society, founded in 1886 by people who wanted to put their values into practice. Over time, many more ethical societies were formed all across the UK, all of which brought people together in community. They held many different forms of meeting, including lectures, singing, discussions, and rambles, as well as other community activities, like secular Sunday schools, kindergartens, and social clubs.

The ethical societies were often active in campaigns for a better and fairer world, bringing people together around causes like women's right to vote in elections, moral education (instead of religious instruction) in schools, and peace. They saw themselves as part of a wider community of people who believed in being good without religion, reaching right around the world.

The logo for 'THE FRIDAY CLUB' features a stylized graphic of a flower or leaf design above the text 'THE FRIDAY CLUB' in a serif font. Below this, the text 'meets on Friday Evenings during the Winter Months.' is written in a smaller font, followed by 'Social Hour with Music. Dancing and Folk Dancing. Lectures, Debates, Concerts, &c.' and 'Next Session Commences Oct. 4th, 1929.' The bottom of the logo features the text 'For particulars apply to Hon. Secretary, Miss OREIGHTON, 93, Chichele Road, Cricklewood, N.W. 2.'

SEASON 1929.  
(SECOND HALF).

PROGRAMME  
OF  
**Summer Rambles**  
ARRANGED BY THE  
**FRIDAY CLUB.**

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### Finding a home

During the 19th century and into the 1900s, many people were suspicious of those who did not have a religion, believing they were immoral or likely to spread dangerous ideas. Sometimes, non-religious groups would be refused the use of venues, or even experience protests during their meetings. Because of this, some groups raised money to construct their own buildings, which they would be safe to use and could decorate according to what they believed. Two such buildings still survive today: Leicester Secular Hall (opened in 1881) and Conway Hall, London (opened in 1929).



*'One of the most important tasks for the future will be in getting new members and making Conway Hall known... holding as we do, views that are not generally accepted by the majority of people... I do feel the need of fellowship of people who more or less share my views... To me fellowship is life and the lack of fellowship is boredom.'*

Edgar Frank Errington on the building of Conway Hall

### Other kinds of community

Over the decades, there have been many different kinds of humanist communities, often gathered around other points of connection. These have included groups for young humanists and humanist students, networks for humanist teachers and humanist nurses, and for LGBT humanists. Many different kinds of activities have been organised and encouraged, like the Humanist Letter Network (offering humanist penpals), humanist holidays, and conventions and conferences. Even when people have not been able to be together in person, newsletters and journals have helped to build a sense of community with other non-religious people across the UK and around the world.

### Humanist groups

As well as humanist groups linked to the national organisation, people with humanist values have also gathered in other small communities. One such group was the Cambridge Heretics, founded in 1909 at the University of Cambridge, who disagreed with the university's requirement to attend chapel and wanted the freedom to discuss anything and everything. Other groups, like the Ipswich Heretics, were simply friends with shared interests who met regularly to discuss science, philosophy, literature, and education.



Members of the Oxford University Humanist Group, 1963

Here are two humanists from the 1960s expressing the value they place on connection with other humanists:

*'By joining a local humanist society – I have joined a community and found "fellowship", made good friends among people whose minds work in a similar way to mine... Joining and working for the Humanist movement has given me confidence and many happy experiences.'*

Barbara Pilbeam, Macclesfield, Cheshire

*'Humanism gives a sense of continuity with life from its beginning in time. Most importantly, it gives a feeling of unity with all courageous thinkers and benefactors of mankind in the past as well as with those people today who look for truth rather than consolation.'*

Grace Attewell, Dorking, Surrey