

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON HUMANISM

Humanism - basic values

- Humanists value all **sentient, conscious** life, including that of animals, and act to **reduce** as much as possible the amount of pain and suffering.
- Humanists value people and their **happiness** and wish life to be **satisfying** for every individual.
- Humanists have **concern** for the present and future state of the world, including all its peoples, as well as its animals and plants. They feel responsible for the future of Planet Earth.
- Humanists value the qualities of **imagination, intelligence** and **creativity**, the use of which gives **enjoyment** and enables the **achievement** of worthwhile goals.
- Humanists value **artistic, intellectual, physical** and **scientific** endeavour.
- Humanists value **truth** because truth is the basis of all social interaction.
- Humanists value the golden rule, the principle of treating others as **you would wish to be treated** in their situation, considering this an excellent foundation for ethical behaviour.
- Humanists value **social action** to improve people's lives because it is by joining together to achieve things that human progress is made.
- Humanists value **rationality**, giving reasons for their decisions and actions.
- Humanists value **fairness** and **justice**, because they regard each person as valuable and entitled to a happy and satisfying life.
- Humanists value **compassion**, because they recognise that every human action is the result of that person's history. They therefore cannot support vindictive punishment or retribution, although they do of course know the deterrent effect of reasonable sanctions; they prefer to try to **reform** people.
- Humanists value **free expression** of ideas and theories because they know that that is how errors are corrected and progress made.
- Humanists value **tolerance**, because they accept people's right to hold differing views and opinions, so long they do not interfere with other people's freedom, happiness and security.
- Humanists value much traditional wisdom and cultures but take a **sceptical attitude** towards all established religions, ideologies and dogmas because they recognise no infallible authority.

Humanists' basic beliefs

- that all religions were created by human beings; all ‘holy’ books and sacred scriptures were actually written by human beings themselves. They may contain much wisdom, but also suffer from the limitations of the people who wrote them and the times at which they were written.
- that human problems will only be solved by human beings; humanists do not believe there is any supernatural source of help, so do not pray to gods.
- that the universe in which we live operates in accord with laws which can be discovered by science; that the scientific method (observation, theory, experiment) is a reliable way to approach the truth about the world.
- that humans and all other life forms on earth today have a common ancestry, having descended by the processes of natural selection from the earliest life forms which began about four billion years ago; life and mind evolved by natural processes.
- that the questions we still have about life and the universe are an exciting challenge to young people to discover the answers (to questions such as the origins of life forms and their DNA, the cures for terrible diseases etc).
- that the fact that death is the end of life and there is no consciousness after death can encourage us to lead a good and worthwhile life.
- that, although there is literally no life after death, the achievements of an individual can live on in the memories of those they knew and the improvements they made in the world.
- the possible consequences of an action should be assessed. One should ask: ‘Will it cause happiness?’ and ‘Will it hurt anyone?’ Faced with the choice of two bad outcomes, they will choose the one that causes less pain.
- that we should apply the same moral principles to decisions involving sex as apply in all other matters - not hurting anyone, being responsible, thoughtful and sincere.
- that violence should not be used against children.
- that every child should be a wanted child.

Glossary of useful terms

An **agnostic** says one cannot *know* whether supernatural beings exist; religious people may *hope* that a god exists.

An **atheist** believes that gods do not exist, whereas a **theist** believes that God does exist. Most humanists live as atheists.

A **materialist** believes that life and consciousness are the natural products of the material universe and conform to its laws; they were not put there by any supernatural force.

A **secular society** would be one where there is no state religion (the C of E is the state religion of the UK at present), receiving privileges over the other religions and beliefs. Individuals and groups with different religious or nonreligious beliefs would be **treated impartially** in public life and have equal rights to maintain their beliefs and practices. Humanists look forward to a secular society.

Humanism is not a religion but an attitude to life.

A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF RESOURCEEES (FILM, DVD, BOOKS ETC) WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE

OUTLINE LESSONS 1- 6 FOR THE HUMANIST UNIT, KEY STAGE 3

1. Understand why humanists reject religious accounts (such as in Genesis) of the origin of the world and of humans. The vast age of the universe and the earth (billions, not thousands of years old). The diversity of life, with millions of different species. Extinct species eg dinosaurs as evidence of the changes which have occurred on earth.
2. The basic idea of the evolution of life on earth by natural selection: that more offspring are produced than can survive, that the individuals differ from each other slightly, and that therefore those most likely to survive are those most suited to their environment.

Humans are primates. The DNA evidence for all life being related is now more important than the fossil evidence for evolution.

3. Humanist ethics: generating happiness, deriving pleasure from helping other people; the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Causing pain or anxiety is wrong. Not allowed to derive pleasure from harming other people or animals. Why it is wrong to steal, use violence etc. Queen Victoria was right to demand chloroform to ease the pain of her childbirth (Against those who quoted the Bible to say that pain in childbirth was right).

4. Humanists will support and nurture sentient life, but believe that groups of cells, eggs, and fetuses are not capable of awareness or sentience (are not conscious) and so it is not unethical to discard them. This also occurs naturally all the time. Stem cell research is OK. Contraception should be available. Termination of pregnancy is likely to be traumatic but if required should occur as soon as possible; efficient contraception is always preferable.

5. What humanists do. Support groups such as Amnesty International, groups which aim to end world poverty, conserve wildlife, end slavery, help the developing world, education for girls in poor countries etc etc. Humanists can have ceremonies, eg naming ceremonies for new babies and wedding ceremonies. Their funerals consist of celebrating the life of the deceased with biographical detail, including their favourite music and poetry. Persons in unstoppable pain and terminally ill should be permitted voluntary euthanasia carried out by a doctor.

6. Humanists would like to see secular states (ie states which do not favour particular religions) throughout the world because that is the only way to give equality to each religion and non-belief. People should be quite free to criticise religions and ideologies because these abstract ideas cannot *feel*; this is not the same as criticising persons or groups who *can* feel. The world's population will increase from its present 6 billion to 9 billion in less than fifty years: humanists believe in the *quality* of life, not mere *quantity*. Thus humanists believe that contraception should be available to all people who may require it, throughout the world (Also for prevention of AIDS).