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# Humanists

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## Origins

The Renaissance, beginning in fourteenth-century Italy, is seen as a key starting point for Humanism in the modern world. The Italian Francesco Petrarca is regarded as the 'father of Renaissance Humanism'. He had a love of the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and was dedicated to recovering lost classical manuscripts and emulating classical figures such as Cicero. The writings of Plato were another key ingredient in the Renaissance. Thomas More's *Utopia* owes much to Plato, as well as to the influence of the great Renaissance scholar Erasmus. The rediscovery of classical texts was a feature of the Renaissance, a trend later accelerated by the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The invention of the printing press in 1440 would also facilitate the spread of classical texts and other writings. The focus on not just the classical texts but the individuals who wrote them reflected an anthropocentrism which was, and is, a key tenet of humanist thought. Medieval writers, taking the lead from the Church, had tended to portray man as a wretched sinful being, but the Renaissance moved man more to the centre, praising his virtues. The Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, led by Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau, provided a further impetus away from the authority of the Church towards a more secular approach. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term *Humanism* had come into common use, and its followers were forming organisations such as the Humanistic Religious Association formed in 1853 in London.

## Today

Humanism has become increasingly high profile, exemplified by the book *The God Delusion*, by the British Humanist Association (BHA) Vice President, Richard Dawkins. There is increasing demand for humanist ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. In Britain there are accredited celebrants trained by the BHA. Humanists actively pursue their legal rights. The American Humanist Association established the Appignani Humanist Legal Centre in 2006 to furnish humanist lawyers as required.

## What the mainstream says

- Humanism is based on humanity and reason.
- Moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone.
- The aims of morality should be human welfare, happiness and fulfilment.
- Decisions are based on available evidence and assessment of outcomes, not on dogma.
- Humanism is a naturalistic view, encompassing atheism and agnosticism as responses to theistic claims, but is an active and ethical philosophy.
- Humans have individual rights and freedoms.
- Individual responsibility, social cooperation and mutual respect are important.
- People can and will continue to find solutions to the world's problems.
- Humans have only one life, and it is their responsibility to live it to the full.

(Source: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/home>)

## Suggested initial Scriptural approach

That man is inherently wicked must be put across. The words of Jeremiah are useful in this regard: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (17:9). The concept of human rights should also be challenged, not least by showing that the only right a man has earned is to die (Rom. 6:23). Also, the failure of democracy can be pointed out, with the choosing of Barabbas (Mt. 27:20) and the decision of "the more part" (Acts 27:12) to sail being examples.