

Secular humanism plays an influential role in politics, education and the media today, and is explicitly anti-Christian. But it has hijacked the name and noble legacy of historic humanism. This briefing explores the roots of secular humanism in Unitarianism, showing how recently it emerged and the danger it poses.

THE HUMANISTS OF HISTORY

It was not until the 20th century that 'humanism' gained its modern meaning of a non-religious and rationalistic outlook on life. Historic humanism was fundamentally Christian in outlook.

Humanism comes from the German word 'humanismus' – used in the mid-19th century to describe an attitude that arose in the Renaissance.¹ The 'humanists' shared a focus on the arts and humanities, with a specific interest in returning to classical Greek and Roman texts.² The term described a shift in intellectual culture and approach, not detailed beliefs.

Historians say

that almost all these Renaissance humanists were Christian.³

Secular humanists claim their history goes back to Ancient Greek and early Chinese civilisations.⁴ They say their tradition is seen in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and many ideas since. But humanists have also admitted retrospectively applying the label to historical figures, who have included Christians.⁵

This amounts to a blatant redefinition of the Western world's Christian heritage.

Secular humanists today are trying to claim this history for themselves and ride on the coattails of men like Erasmus (pictured left).

...the vast majority of humanists were patently sincere Christians who wished to apply their enthusiasm to the exploration and proclamation of their faith.⁶

**DIARMAID MACCULLOCH,
HISTORIAN**



INSIDE

See key figures in the development of secular humanism, which seized the legacy of historic humanism.

Who were the historic humanists?

TRUE SCHOLARSHIP

The original humanist movement gave rise to the principle of “*ad fontes*”. The Latin phrase literally means “to the sources”, and was an exhortation to go back to studying original Greek and Latin texts. Diarmaid MacCulloch calls it “the battle cry of the humanists”.⁷

Lorenzo Valla (pictured) was an Italian humanist scholar and priest. In 1440, his analysis exposed the Donation of



Constantine – alleged to support papal claims to political authority – as a forgery. Through examining the text itself, he showed that it could not have been written in the 4th century as was claimed but was from much later.⁸

For Christians *ad fontes* included a return to the earliest sources of Christian thought – to the Bible studied in its original languages, and also to the Church Fathers.

Alongside other humanist methods, *ad fontes* motivated figures like Luther and Calvin to re-examine the texts of the Bible and Church teaching, giving us the Reformation as we know it.

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

The humanist ideas of the Renaissance were exemplified by Erasmus, who is often referred to as the ‘prince of humanists’. The humanist principle of *ad fontes* led Erasmus to produce the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516. It allowed scholars to compare the Latin Vulgate with the original Greek for the first time.

One result was that several translation issues in the Vulgate were highlighted. Major ones were the mistranslation of “repent” (Matthew 4:17) as “do penance” and the Vulgate saying “full of grace” when Mary is described as a “favoured one” (Luke 1:28). These errors had significantly influenced Church teaching and practice, and refuting them helped fuel the Reformation.



Erasmus of Rotterdam

KEY DATES

1440

Lorenzo Valla exposes the Donation of Constantine as a forgery

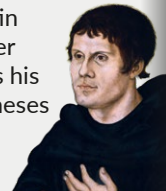
1516

Erasmus publishes the New Testament in Greek



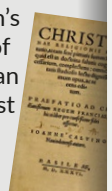
1517

Martin Luther posts his 95 theses



1536

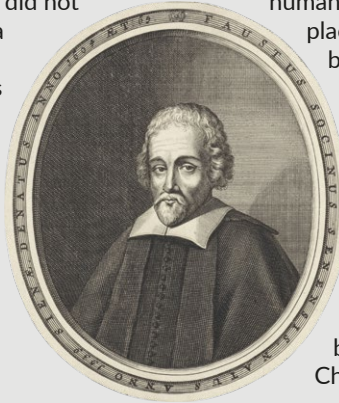
John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion first published



Unitarians break from orthodoxy

After the Reformation, some who were pushing to rethink Church teaching attacked the doctrine of the Trinity. This gave rise to Unitarianism, which denies the divinity of Christ. Fausto Sozzini (pictured) taught that Jesus did not exist before being born as a human child.⁹

In England, John Biddle's 'Twofold Catechism' (1654) set out Unitarian beliefs, teaching that Jesus was not divine but became 'Lord' only after his death and resurrection.¹⁰ By the end of the 18th century, congregations had formed around this teaching in the



UK and USA. In 1825 associations were created on both sides of the Atlantic, formalising the Unitarian denomination.¹¹

From its early days, Unitarian teaching was heretical and strongly focused on human reason. Despite this, it still placed an emphasis on man's best interest being served by an adherence to scripture.¹² However, its theological liberalism drew in many whose views were excluded elsewhere. By the end of the 19th century, the group had extensively liberalised, often abandoning the biblical texts and traditional Christianity wholesale.

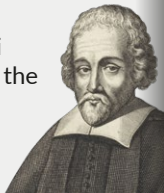
LOSING THE TRINITY MEANS LOSING EVERYTHING

Although the word 'trinity' is not in the Bible, the doctrine clearly is. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 28:19 to baptise "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Paul reflects on the Trinity in his benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The Trinity is foundational to orthodox Christian belief. The early church defended it against false teaching, like the Arian heresy that said Christ was not equal to the Father in 'substance'. Any group that does not believe in the Godhead of three equally divine persons has already parted ways with Christianity and so will soon drop other key doctrines.

1562

Fausto Sozzini denies the Trinity



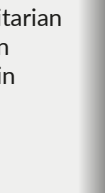
1654

John Biddle publishes Twofold Catechism



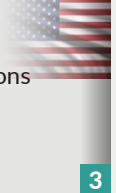
1774

The first Unitarian congregation established in England

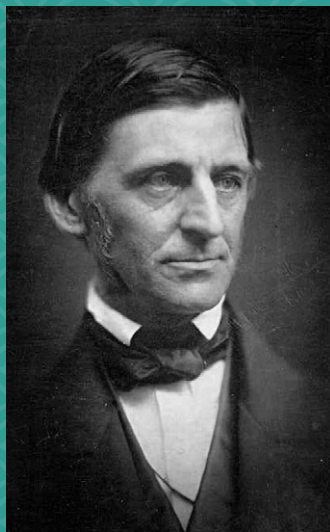


1825

Formation of Unitarian denominations



US Unitarians throw out the Bible



🕒 Ralph Waldo Emerson



🕒 Felix Adler

Ralph Waldo Emerson pushed Unitarianism in the USA in an even more liberal direction. He adopted ideas from the European Romantic Movement of the early 19th century, prioritising nature and man's intuition over texts or doctrine.

Emerson was a founder of the group known as the 'Transcendentalists', whose liberal beliefs assumed that the Bible was corrupt and that doctrine was damaging to man's freedom. This group was relatively small, but it had a disproportionate influence and many Unitarian ministers followed its ideas.

These ministers felt unable to sign up to a Unitarian confession that emphasised the Bible, so the Free Religious Association was formed in 1865 to encompass their 'liberal religion'.¹³

The association included progressive Quakers, liberal Jews, Universalists, agnostics and spiritualists.

Among them was Felix Adler, who had begun an 'Ethical Society' movement. The Ethical Movement sought to be: "open to all those who believed in moral betterment, because that is the point on which we all agree. Our ethical religion has its basis in the effort to improve the world and ourselves morally."¹⁴

Meanwhile, the Unitarians continued to liberalise, though they still held services. The Free Religious Association came back into fellowship with the Unitarian denomination in 1894. From this point, Unitarianism was the main home to those who were to become known as 'humanists' in the USA.

1834



South Place Chapel breaks away from Unitarian denomination

1860s

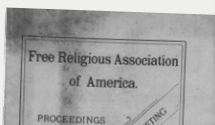


South Place congregation renamed South Place Religious Society

1865



Free Religious Association formed



1876



Beginning of the Ethical Movement



Ethical societies in the UK



SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL

The history of secular humanism in the UK can be traced back to one Unitarian congregation in London – South Place Chapel. More liberal in its outlook than other Unitarian churches of the time, in 1834 it broke away from the denomination.

Moncure D. Conway, from the US, became minister of South Place Chapel in 1864. A Harvard graduate and a notable figure, he inhabited the same literary circles as Emerson and knew the likes of Mark Twain, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Charles Dickens.¹⁵ He followed the Transcendentalist inclination towards liberal religion. Conway renamed the congregation 'South Place Religious Society' – an attempt to detach it from its Christian heritage and look towards a new human-centric religion.

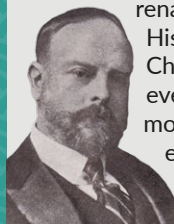
STANTON COIT

Conway returned to the USA and fellow American Stanton Coit replaced him at South Place in 1888.

Coit persuaded the congregation to become part of Felix Adler's 'Ethical Movement', prompting another name change to the 'South Place Ethical Society'.¹⁶ Despite removing the term 'religious' from the name, the society did not really change, and Coit soon moved on. He was on a mission to turn all traditional religious thinking 'Ethical', and began other Ethical Societies in London.

In 1890, Coit was involved in setting up the East London Ethical Society and in 1894 he established the West London Ethical Society. In 1896 he formed the Union of Ethical Societies – the umbrella body for all England's Ethical Societies.

Despite the rapidly growing Ethical Society movement, Coit was not content. In 1909 he made a new move and purchased a former Methodist Chapel, renaming it 'the Ethical Church'.



His hope was that the entire Church of England would eventually join his Ethical Church movement – a new religion that encompassed all mankind to the exclusion of God.¹⁷

1888



Stanton Coit becomes minister at South Place Religious Society; renamed South Place Ethical Society



1894



Free Religious Association comes back into fellowship with Unitarians

1896



Union of Ethical Societies formed

Humanist Manifestos I & II

The first Humanist Manifesto (1933) was explicitly religious. Many involved in the 'liberal religion' of 'humanism' were ministers and members of US Unitarian congregations: its authors and at least half of its signatories were Unitarians.¹⁸

Humanist Manifesto I said that "science and economic change" required a revision of old religious beliefs. It set out what it called the 'true' religion. 'Religious humanism', it claimed, was freed from doctrines, methods and texts that had defined religion. Humanism at this time remained markedly religious. Though it rejected the supernatural, it was certainly not the secular humanism of today.

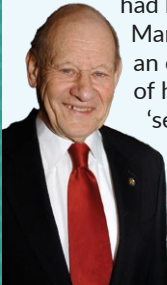
World War II forced a major rethink of the earlier optimism of 'liberal religions'.

Christian thinkers argued that the war had shown the dangers of dependence on human reason and science. Humanist Manifesto II (1973) was a response to this challenge. While it recognised the horrors scientific advancement and humanistic morality had produced, it reasserted that 'humanity must save itself'.¹⁹

But Manifesto II still had 'religious' humanism at the forefront. The American Unitarians had joined with the Universalist church in the early 1960s. In this denomination of around 150,000 people, almost all considered themselves 'humanists'. The non-religious form of humanism was still not prominent.



EXPLICITLY SECULAR: HUMANIST MANIFESTO III



Over the next decade, Paul Kurtz – who had been instrumental in writing Manifesto II – set out to formalise an explicitly non-religious vision of humanism. Adopting the term 'secular humanism', he established the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980. It issued the Secular Humanist Declaration, which restated

Humanist Manifesto II in explicitly non-religious terms.²⁰ In the US, this marked the final point of transition from an explicitly 'religious' movement to the secular one we are familiar with today.

Humanist Manifesto III was published in 2003. It greatly shortens Manifesto II and, like Kurtz's Declaration, removes much of the 'religious' language that had previously characterised humanist belief and practice.

1920



Union of Ethical Societies becomes Ethical Union

1933



Humanist Manifesto I



1952

International Humanist and Ethical Union founded



1965



Ethical Union becomes British Humanist Association



Secular humanism emerges in the UK

Over 70 Ethical Societies were formed in Britain before the 1920s, but the peak of the movement did not last long; only ten were left by the early 1930s. With interest in 'ethical' worship fading, the Ethical Movement shifted away from its 'religious' past.²¹

In the 1950s and 60s, the few remaining Ethical Societies began to change name to include the word 'humanist'. This reflected the end of the 'religious' form of fellowships that were central to the Ethical Movement. Rather than close-knit communities of people meeting together weekly for a 'worship' style service, it became largely an intellectual movement of occasional lectures and political campaigns. Formalised 'religious' humanism had drawn to a close.

BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

In 1965 the Ethical Union (formerly Coit's Union of Ethical Societies) was renamed the 'British Humanist Association'.²²

Since then, the British Humanist Association has focused on political campaigning, especially on education, LGBT issues, abortion and euthanasia. It maintains the ceremonies of the Ethical Society days – baby 'namings', weddings and funerals – but weekly gatherings have not been a significant feature of the modern-day movement.²³ Until 2011, the stated goal of the British Humanist Association was "the moral and social development of the community free from theistic or dogmatic beliefs and doctrines" – the elimination of religious belief.²⁴ In 2017, The British Humanist Association was rebranded 'Humanists UK'.



HUMANISTS INTERNATIONAL

Founded in 1952 in Amsterdam as the 'International Humanist and Ethical Union', Humanists International represents secular humanist groups globally. It has its headquarters in London and shares its president with Humanists UK. It promotes secular humanism and its political policies across the globe.

The 'Amsterdam Declaration' was accepted at its inaugural meeting in 1952, calling humanism "a faith that answers the challenge of our times" and describing it as an ethical "way of life".²⁵ This more 'religious' language was removed in the 2002 version of the Amsterdam Declaration.²⁶



1973

Humanist Manifesto II



1980

Secular Humanist Declaration



2003

Humanist Manifesto III



2017

British Humanist Association rebranded Humanists UK



Secular humanism in action today

Secular humanists claim to represent those in the UK who call themselves 'non-religious'.²⁷ But this growing proportion of the population widely reject being labelled as 'humanists'. There are all sorts of reasons people call themselves 'non-religious' and many reject the idea of a human-centred religion that sees mankind trying to save itself. 'Non-religious' is not the same as 'atheist' or 'secular humanist'.

Humanists UK has done some welcome work to help to protect free speech. However, in general the 'ethical' approach claimed by Humanists UK is worrying. Its former charitable objects showed that it was committed to eliminating religious belief. But has the leopard really changed its spots?



Despite the claim that adherents are guided purely by reason and science, free to make ethical choices without creed or doctrine, Humanists UK's campaigns show its values:

- ▶ It is heavily involved in campaigns to end any religious worship in schools, to include humanism in the RE syllabus, and to bring an end to church schools and other schools with a religious character;²⁸
- ▶ It campaigns for a fully secular state, arguing for the disestablishment of the Church of England and the removal of Government funding "privileges" from religious groups;²⁹
- ▶ It is strongly pro-abortion, arguing for decriminalisation, the provision of home-use abortion pills, buffer zones around abortion clinics and the restriction of medical professionals' right to conscientiously object;³⁰
- ▶ It is one of the foremost campaigners for the legalisation of euthanasia and assisted suicide in the UK;³¹
- ▶ It wants to liberalise sex education in schools, to include abortion and teaching on LGBT issues within the syllabus, with no right of withdrawal;³²
- ▶ It has consistently promoted LGBT rights.³³

References available at christian.org.uk/humanism-ref



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