



# WHY HUMANISM?

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO  
HUMANIST DISCUSSIONS

freethinkers



Humanists  
INTERNATIONAL

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# WHAT IS HUMANISM?

In most organized religions, followers are taught to dedicate their lives to a god or some other supernatural being (or beings). This dedication even reaches the point that religious beliefs are followed even if this does some potential harm to others; duty to the Creator, after all, trumps any obligation to mere creations.

This religious devotion has justified such historical atrocities as slavery, wars, and witchhunts; more recently, blocking progress that would guarantee rights such as marriage equality, safe and legal abortion, and comprehensive sex education.

## Humanity first

In contrast to such religions, humanism is a philosophy that considers people as the beings that ultimately matter<sup>1,2,3</sup>. Humanism asserts our innate value and dignity as people (without reference to some deity), our capacity to understand the universe through reason and science (without the need for divine revelation), and our ability to make free choices and moral decisions<sup>1</sup> (without any god to take commands or judgments from).

Humanism is thus a rejection of supernatural rules in favor of rational principles that lead to the happiness and flourishing of people<sup>3,5,6</sup>. Unlike with religions, humanism does not follow any fundamental text or dogma<sup>1</sup>. There is no definitive set of humanist beliefs<sup>7</sup>, but there are principles that modern interpretations of humanism have in common.



## The freedom to choose

What defines ‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing’ may invite debate among humanists. This is a good thing! An important aspect of humanism is autonomy, or the idea that we are free to think for ourselves without an external authority<sup>2</sup>. The rejection of the certainty of religion means there are no sacred texts that tell us that the purpose of life is to please gods or to get rewards in an afterlife.

We have to figure out the answers on our own, in the context of our experiences<sup>8,9</sup>. This is both an exhilarating prospect and a deeply frightening one. In this way, humanism leads to something that religions cannot truly offer: the freedom to be yourself and to define what that means for you.

## Good without gods

However, because humanists recognize our autonomy to make choices, they also recognize that we are responsible for the consequences<sup>2,10</sup>. Contrary to what some critics of humanism say, humanists are not moral relativists. Morality is not whatever we say it is, but neither is it bestowed upon us by divine revelation<sup>7</sup>. With reason and science, humanists believe we can understand and do good even without religious belief.

Humanist ethics are informed by what science says about human nature and behavior<sup>2</sup>. As social animals, we are capable of empathy<sup>11</sup> and have emotional responses to how other people behave<sup>12</sup>. Thus, we can observe how our actions affect others, and we use our reason to reflect on what might be the right thing to do<sup>13</sup>. Because of our moral agency, we have an obligation to do good for all people<sup>5,7</sup>. We can even extend this moral concern beyond humans—toward all living things and the environment<sup>5,12</sup>. This inclusive approach to progress and helping humanity is essential. Reason and science<sup>3</sup> can only flourish where civil rights and liberties are allowed.

Thus, the humanist ideal is to practice a life where we are not only individually fulfilled, but our moral responsibilities to others are satisfied<sup>3,5,7</sup>.



# AM I A HUMANIST?

While there are humanist organizations around the world, humanism as a concept is not owned by anyone. You don't need to be indoctrinated or baptized into any group. It is simply an identity that may or may not describe your own beliefs. If you agree with what you've read so far, there's a good chance you are a humanist<sup>5</sup>.

## Beyond non-belief

Although many humanists may identify with other non-religious identities such as atheist, agnostic, or freethinker, humanism extends beyond non-belief<sup>2</sup>. Humanism is associated with other rights movements that promote humanist principles: feminism<sup>14</sup> and LGBTQ rights, to name a few<sup>15,16</sup>.

An atheist might not support these movements, or may even oppose them. Although many, if not most, humanists are atheists, not all atheists are humanists.

## Heaven on Earth

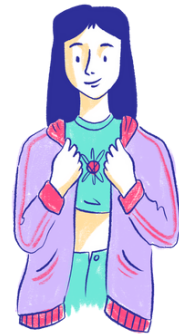
Of course, these movements themselves have ideologies that may not have much to do with humanism. However, what tends to be in common is the belief that all people deserve to live their lives free from oppression. Because religion is often a tool used to oppose social justice, such as when churches support racist and misogynist laws, humanists have become major allies in the fight for human rights.

Humanists hold critical roles in society to not only push back against the regressive beliefs of religion but also to show that there is an alternative path—that life can be lived ethically and meaningfully without religion. There may not be an afterlife, so humanists strive to make the most of the one life we have—here and now.



# IS IT SAFE FOR ME TO BE A HUMANIST?

Every year there are more and more people identifying as non-religious<sup>17</sup>. Despite some challenges we may face, there is a lot to be hopeful about as more people join the global humanist community. However, depending on where you live, it may be valid to feel fear for your safety as a non-believer. In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that harassment of people unaffiliated with religion had risen sharply. The harassment their study considered ranged from verbal abuse to killings. This harassment could also come from private individuals, or it could be state-sponsored<sup>18</sup>.



## Ask Yourself

To see whether it is safe for you to be openly humanist, you may ask yourself the following questions:

1. Will the people I live with accept that I am a humanist?
2. Will my friends and family treat me differently if they knew that I am a humanist?
3. Will my school or workplace discriminate against me identifying as a humanist?
4. Will I be treated fairly by my government as a humanist?

Depending on your answers to these questions, you may gauge to what extent you feel safe and comfortable being open about being a humanist. As with many personal things, such as gender identity, it is entirely up to you how much, or how little, you want to share about yourself with others.

## Is it safe to advocate for humanism?

This risk may be even greater if you are an advocate for humanism and non-religion. Leaders of humanist organizations worldwide, such as Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanist Society of Nigeria, were arrested in 2020 under blasphemy charges<sup>19</sup>. In 2017, Yameen Rasheed, a blogger in the Maldives, was killed by a mob. He had been known as a critic of religious fundamentalism<sup>20</sup>.

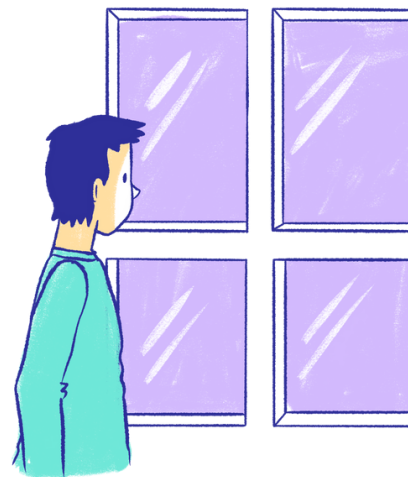
Being openly humanist is often a privilege and one that should not be taken for granted. Religious majorities often impose laws against non-religion under the guise of stopping blasphemy. In 2011, reproductive health advocate Carlos Celdran was found guilty of “offending religious feelings,” a law that dates back to Spanish colonial times<sup>21</sup>.



## The risk of being openly non-religious

A recent online survey conducted by Filipino Freethinkers found that almost 15% of openly non-religious respondents said they had experienced abuse because of their lack of religion. In comparison, around 12% of public advocates for non-religion had also experienced some form of abuse. Over 50% of public advocates for non-religion said they had felt unsafe due to their advocacy at least occasionally.

Young humanists still dependent on their parents or guardians are particularly at risk because they could get kicked out of their homes for being non-religious<sup>22</sup>. If you do not have the means to support yourself and rely on people who discriminate against humanists for food and shelter, it is worth considering whether being openly non-religious or humanist is in your best interest. These risks also exist in school<sup>23</sup>. However, lying by omission or concealing who you are might go against your moral values, in which case, you must weigh these risks against your personal principles. Everyone’s situation is unique, and in such cases, it might be better to consult a trusted person who knows your personal context.



Knowing that there is a risk not only in being a leader of humanist groups but in merely being openly non-religious, you should always consider your safety in the context of where you live and the people around you. Even in relatively progressive countries like Iceland<sup>24</sup>, religious discrimination still exists because of their state religion.

# NEXT STEPS

## How can I find out more?

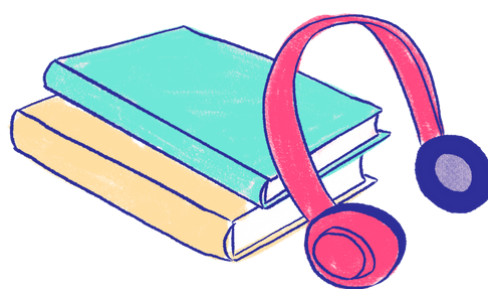
Becoming a humanist may feel intimidating at first. Many new humanists also have to cope with letting go of years of religious conditioning. Luckily, in the age of the internet, many resources that would have been difficult to find or outright banned are now easily accessible.

Two classic books that remain relevant for new humanists are: **Why I Am Not a Christian** by Bertrand Russell and **The Demon-Haunted World** by Carl Sagan. They tackle some of the biggest problems of Christianity and organized religion and put forward a secular worldview. Paul Kurtz's book **What is Secular Humanism?** is also a foundational book that shaped more recent discussions of humanism.

Fiction has also been one avenue for writers to speak about humanism, if indirectly. Philip Pullman's **His Dark Materials** trilogy is celebrated for its great story and presents critiques of organized religion. Douglas Adams' **Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** gives readers a profound yet humorous touch on the meaning of life.

Friendly Atheist Hemant Mehta has consistently helped move the secular community beyond simple religious criticism. He hosts a regular podcast, the Friendly Atheist Podcast that is a must-listen for humanists everywhere.

Filipino Freethinkers hosts over a decade of writings, from the basics of atheism to profiles of local freethinkers on our website. You can also keep up to date with our latest events, workshops, and meetups there.





## Finding your people

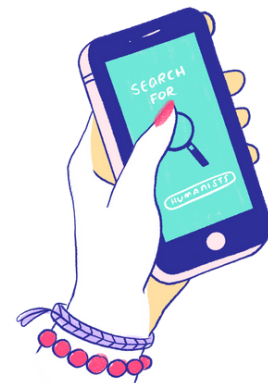
One of the biggest things a new humanist might have to deal with is the loss of religious community. Just because we don't believe in the supernatural doesn't mean we don't need fellowship anymore<sup>25</sup>. On the contrary, we need others more than ever precisely because we don't believe that a god will somehow solve the problems we pray for.



When we need help, comfort, or just like-minded people to have fun with, humanist groups are there to fill the void religion may have left behind. Humanists worldwide have created spaces where humanists and secular people can meet each other for fellowship or activism. You may find a local humanist chapter on Facebook or Reddit. Filipino Freethinkers has a very active community on Facebook that we invite you to join<sup>26</sup>.

## Starting your own group

Should you find yourself in a place where there are no humanist groups, perhaps you may consider starting your own. Young humanists can turn to Young Humanists International for their excellent guide on creating your own secular group. They show some best practices for organizing and promoting your presence as you start<sup>27</sup>.



The best way to form a humanist group is really to just start. You can start small with friends or by announcing on social media like Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit, that you are looking for humanists in your area. Starting online is particularly easy and may even be necessary for places hit hard by the covid pandemic. But, when it is safe, meeting in real life is simply unrivaled for creating lasting bonds and camaraderie<sup>28</sup>.

You can organize events, online or in real life, on platforms like Discord, Facebook, or Meetup.com. For Filipino Freethinkers, we organize meetups to discuss the latest social issues or hold talks with local experts on matters like feminism. Your own group can focus on issues that are important to your members and your local community.



Should you start your own group or join an existing one, the most important thing is that you find a group that helps you grow in your journey through life.

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**Writer:** Garrick Bercero

**Editor:** Red Tani

**Managing Editor:** Kristine Chan

**Illustrator:** Claudine Delfin

**Designer:** Kristine Chan

**Tagalog Translator:** Cha Roque

**Project Manager:** Kristine Chan

## **FILIPINO FREETHINKERS**

[www.filipinofreethinkers.org](http://www.filipinofreethinkers.org)

[secretary@filipinofreethinkers.org](mailto:secretary@filipinofreethinkers.org)

Facebook: [facebook.com/freethinkers](https://facebook.com/freethinkers)

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