Overview of Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is an ethical philosophy, based on reason and science, that places human responsibility at the centre of ethical decision-making. It’s a way of life for many who seek to live ethical, meaningful and deeply satisfying lives without superstition, religious dogma or guilt. This philosophy rejects the supernatural and instead uses the scientific method to understand ethics and to discover knowledge about ourselves and our world. The secular humanist philosophy can be summed up as: “A good life is the responsibility of human beings; we are responsible for what we do and for the consequences of what we do.”

Secular humanists use reason and evidence to answer the big questions about life, meaning and the world around us. Historically there have been several strands of secular humanism, including Rationalism, Humanism, Scepticism and Freethought.

Principles of Secular Humanism

1) There is a natural universe independent of human experience, thought and language, and this natural universe is the ultimate reality.
2) The universe and everything in it, including people, were not created by a god or gods.
3) Every person has only one life, which ends when a person dies. Purpose and meaning are generated by people, not received from a god or a religious text.
4) People are therefore responsible for how they live and treat others, including non-human species, and the environment.
5) Secular humanists draw on collective experience, empirical evidence and reason to establish ethical principles, based on a sense of common humanity and aimed at enhancing human wellbeing.
6) These principles include affirming human dignity and individual freedom, compatible with the rights of others; such principles form the basis of practical moral decision-making.
7) Secular humanism has arisen out of philosophical inquiry dating back to the ancient Greeks and Romans.
8) Secular humanism gained modern form after the 18th century Age of Enlightenment which focused on the powers of human reason and science, rejecting religious dogma.

Where has secular humanism come from?

The word ‘secular’ comes from the Latin ‘saecularis’ or ‘saeculum’, meaning generation or age, but in the Middle Ages, ‘secular’ came to be used by Christians to mean ‘worldly’ as opposed to ‘religious or spiritual’.

In more modern times, ‘secular’ is often used by Christians and other religionists to mean ‘non-religious’. However, in politics, ‘secularism’ refers to the idea of separation between religious institutions like the church and government institutions like parliament.

Modern secularism has three key principles:

1. The separation of religious institutions from state (government) institutions.
2. Unrestricted freedom to hold religious or non-religious beliefs (worldviews); plus, the freedom to put into practice codes of conduct associated with those beliefs as long as doing so does not harm others; plus, the freedom to not have a religion at all or to change one’s religion.
3. Political and social equality between worldviews, so that holding any particular religion or belief confers neither an advantage nor a disadvantage.

Secularism raises important questions about how, in a modern society, we should balance fundamental human freedoms: freedom of religion and belief; freedom of expression; freedom of association.

The word ‘humanist’ comes from the Greek ‘Anthropos’, meaning man or human being. Humanism has ancient roots, dating from the first millennium BCE in ancient China, India and Greece, through the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, to modern era secular liberal democracies and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
Humanism is a worldview held by those who seek to live good lives guided by the best ideas thoughtful humans have come up with. Humanists have no doctrine or creed they must sign up to and may differ on the specifics of the best way to live. While there may be shades of opinion, most agree that humanists:

- Value humanity and celebrate human achievements
- Believe the world is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side
- Support the scientific method as the best way to understand the natural world
- Believe morality is a human construct, not something derived from a god or from some sacred text
- Encourage people to use reason, empathy, compassion and respect when deciding how to act
- Are usually atheistic (don’t believe there is a god) or agnostic (believe we can’t know if there is a god).
- Are secularists, believing in freedom of religion and belief, and that no particular religion or belief should hold a privileged place in society.