

Humanist History

Summary: Contemporary Humanism draws its lineage from a branching intellectual genealogy that includes South Asian atheists, classical philosophers, medieval Muslim scholars, and Enlightenment culture. Like their forebears, modern Humanists and atheists concern themselves with rationality, science, the perceptible world, and human life, rather than with potential divine realms or deities.

There is a proud tradition of seeking goodness and wisdom without a God. Although the term Humanism has been used to describe this endeavor for only about a century, a number of different historical settings show how and where the key beliefs and motifs of modern Humanism emerged.

Three millennia ago, the doubts of impious South Asians crystallized into what are probably the world's first completely atheistic schools of thought: the Lokayata and Carvaka. These like-minded groups of philosophers observed that no one has ever been able to prove that he or she has witnessed a miracle, nor could any confirm that a god has ever appeared on earth or that anyone has ever risen from the dead. With this recognition, the Lokayata and Carvaka rejected the supernatural religions they found around them and instead taught goodness and righteousness for the sake of this world. In addition to strongly opposing the Indian caste system, these philosophers decried the practice of sacrificing and offering elaborate dishes to the gods while people around them starved.

Centuries later, the Greek philosopher Epicurus theorized that the world was composed entirely of atoms that operated according to natural laws. In his view, it was possible that gods had created the universe, but they did not seem to care about or respond to its inhabitants, and so could not be relevant to our lives. Epicurus taught that human beings must examine all that we do, all that we love and value, and choose only that which is worth choosing. He championed human happiness, which he understood to be deep satisfaction, fulfillment, and dignity—not the kind of shallow, fleeting pleasure that is often erroneously associated with his name.

The view that this world is all there is was present during the Middle Ages as well. Although commonly assumed to be a universally pious era, closer examination of this period reveals deep doubts, particularly in the early Muslim world. For example, the agnostic Abu Bakr al-Razi was a famous Persian doctor, philosopher, chemist, and humanitarian. He devoted his life to improving the lives of those around him,

and to carefully studying all the religions of his time, mining them for whatever worldly wisdom he could find while indulging in the truth claims of none. Although al-Razi was beloved despite his unorthodox opinions, the same could not be said for all doubters. In the early modern period, before the Enlightenment made skepticism commonplace, many suffered for their doubts. Some, like Giordano Bruno, were executed for heresy; others, like Baruch Spinoza, were exiled from their communities.

As the Enlightenment blossomed, the vast majority of people (religious and otherwise) came to see careful observation, testing, and reliance on evidence as the best ways of gaining knowledge about the world around them. When this new science produced findings that contradicted literal readings of the sacred scriptures of the time, a new understanding of God, called deism, came to dominate the Enlightenment. Deists—much like Epicurus—believe that if a god created the universe then this god’s interactions with the world would be limited to assigning nature’s laws. Miracles and answers to prayers, for instance, have no place in a deistic worldview. The Enlightenment also changed the entire idea of a good life: when suffering seemed more or less inevitable, it was tempting to believe that suffering in this life could earn happiness in the next; but when human achievements in medicine, technology, commerce, and communication massively improved general well-being, people could focus on making this life as enjoyable as it could be.

The spirit of the Enlightenment took root in the United States in the 19th century as the “golden age of freethought” spread throughout the country. The popularization of Darwin’s work on evolution and the speeches of famed orator Robert Ingersoll promoted the notion that this world was best understood through science and reason, and that humans should not look for salvation in an afterlife. At the same time Felix Adler, founder of the Ethical Culture movement, declared the need for a “religion of ethics” which put the central focus of human living on ethical action and relationships, regardless of belief in God.

Humanists today share many of the same insights that motivated doubters of previous generations to focus their efforts on improving this life. More able than ever to openly express and explore their nontheistic worldview, Humanists are coming together across the United States and across the world to shine a rational, scientific light on all areas of human life. In doing so, they constantly seek to improve our understanding of the cosmos and of each other.