

about

humanism



## What is Humanism?

Humanism is a philosophy which holds that human beings are responsible for giving meaning and purpose to their own lives, that people must question and think for themselves using reason and scientific inquiry, and that all people should aspire to the greater good of humanity. Humanists embrace a rational approach to social issues. In analysing policy matters, we draw upon relevant scientific theories, reliable research, and available data. Where policy decisions require a moral dimension, we apply ethical reasoning - i.e. a moral argument based on logic and empiricism.

## Who are the TT Humanists?

The members of the Association come from a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs. We are united by our concern for Trinidad and Tobago, particularly the growing trend of irrationality and intolerance in both the private and public spheres. We are dedicated to the promotion of reason, tolerance, and compassion in our society and in the wider world.

## The roots of Humanism

In 1345, the Italian scholar Francesco Petrarch found a volume of the lost letters of the Roman philosopher, Cicero. These inspired a whole new way of thinking, which came to be called Humanism. Cicero's *humanitas* (literally, "human nature") was a programme of training proper for orators, first set forth in *De Oratore* (Of the Orator) in 55 BCE. In the early Middle Ages the Church Fathers, including St. Augustine, adapted *humanitas* to a programme of basic Christian education. Mathematics, linguistic and philological studies, and some history, philosophy, and science were included.

In India, the Lokâyata doctrine of the seventh century BCE was the basis of a Hindu humanist philosophy. Its adherents, the Carvaka, held that only the perceived existed and that the unperceivable does not exist by reason of its never having been perceived. This period also saw the founding of Samkhya. This is the oldest of the six orthodox schools of Hinduism, and holds that the universe came into being without a personal Creator.

In 500 BCE, around the time that Buddhism began to flourish, Confucianism took hold in China. This famous philosophy was centred on social relations and duties, and did not invoke a Supreme Being as a necessary justification for moral behaviour.

In the ninth century in the Middle East, the Faylasufs emerged, embracing a philosophical humanism that celebrated the scientific and philosophical heritage of the Greeks. They maintained that the Qu'ran was a valid path to God for those who could not find their way by reason. Such debates flourished in Islamic culture at the height of its power.

Our views : :

: : ethics

Moral arguments must always be based on the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") and the principle that action must make people better off. This rule underlies all social rules and customs. Murder is wrong because society is destroyed unless there are laws against murder. But, by the same token, society has a responsibility to eradicate as far as possible those social conditions which create murderers.

: : science

We consider science - i.e. dispassionate reason guided by observation and experimentation - as the only device for understanding reality to any practical purpose. We acknowledge intuition, religion, and mysticism as avenues for introspection or for constructing social norms. However, we believe the scientific method to be superior to all others for the following reasons: science has given human beings more mastery over the world than any other knowledge-device; scientific laws are true everywhere; the knowledge gained through science can be shared with others, unlike knowledge attained through mystic experience or intuition, which are essentially private experiences. Hence, in the discussion of any issue, we invoke scientific knowledge as far as possible.

## :: education

We see education as the main device by which Trinidad and Tobago can be transformed for the better. However, the imparting of skills and knowledge will not be sufficient for this task. Educators must also teach young people how to think for themselves. The principles of rationality and the rules of ethical behaviour must inform every subject.

## :: culture

We consider culture, in its sense of art, as playing a key role in helping us understand and create our society. Music, literature and the visual arts can help human beings to understand the possibilities and the limits of the world. But art can also play a negative role in society, by promoting superstition, feel-good fantasies, and wrong-headed analyses.

## :: governance

The TT Humanists are not about party politics nor are we primarily concerned with constitutional matters. However, insofar as government affects the kind of policies implemented by the State, we will promote a certain kind of government structure and policy approach. Thus, we stand for the strict separation of church/mandir/mosque and State.

This principle is for the protection of both State and religion. A State cannot cater to all citizens equally when it has to cater to fundamentally opposed belief systems. Religions are at risk of suppression when the State caters to religious groups, for there is always the danger that the agents of the State may begin to favour one group over all others.

We hold that that religious spokespersons should, however, have a voice in governance, since many citizens look to religious organisations for guidance. But these organisations' positions should not carry more weight than any other group's, except and insofar that their arguments make more sense than any other group's. The lessons of history teach that a secular State is the only polity that even in theory can be fair to all.

## :: crime

In our society, crime is seen as a phenomenon to be punished. We view crime as a phenomenon to be prevented. Our approach is therefore essentially long-term. The experience of other countries has shown that crime can be managed by scientifically-grounded approaches, both in terms of policing, incarceration, and social policies. We believe that there are, in fact, no other ways to effectively contain criminal activity.

## :: gender

There is a strong correlation between gender rights and national development. Unfortunately, discussion of gender issues is often corrupted by irrationality from both traditionalists and feminists. As in all other issues, the TT Humanist Association will use the best research and ethical argument on gender matters, the most controversial of which is undoubtedly abortion law reform and gay rights. We are neither in favour nor opposed to abortion, since we believe it is a matter of individual conscience. However, we do support reform of the abortion law since the present law, apart from being unclear and bereft of a proper jurisprudential foundation, constitutes a trespass on the right of the woman to choose. We also support equal rights for homosexuals since, unlike those who oppose such rights, we do not think tolerance of homosexuality causes people to become gay.

## The importance of humanism for Trinidad and Tobago

There is no society on the Earth which has become prosperous and stable without applying the standards of rationality, ethics, and tolerance. T&T is a tolerant society, but this achievement will not be maintained without the application of reason and ethical standards. We see humanism as a guiding philosophy which can help improve all aspects of national life.



"The Humanist philosophy embraces everyone who believes in rational thought and ethical principles, and is willing to be active in the services of these principles."

"Ethics are principles derived from reason and observation and based on the view that we should treat others as we would wish to be treated and that our actions should cause no harm to others."

For more of our views and links to over 100 humanist associations around the world visit our web site:

**[www.humanist.org.tt](http://www.humanist.org.tt)**



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