

# Humanism

The word humanism has been freely applied to a variety of beliefs, methods, and philosophies that place central emphasis on what it means to be human. Frequently, the term is used with reference to a system of education and mode of inquiry that developed in northern Italy during the 14th century and later spread through Europe and England. Alternately known as "Renaissance humanism," this program was so broadly and profoundly influential that it is one of the chief reasons why the Renaissance is viewed as a distinct historical period.

## ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE TERM HUMANISM

### The Ideal of *Humanitas*.

The history of the term humanism is complex but enlightening. It was first employed (as *humanismus*) by 19th-century German scholars to designate the Renaissance emphasis on classical studies in education. These studies were pursued and endorsed by educators known, as early as the late 15th century, as *umanisti*: that is, professors or students of classical literature. The word *umanisti* derives from the *studia humanitatis*, a course of classical studies that, in the early 15th century, consisted of grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy. The *studia humanitatis* were held to be the equivalent of the Greek *paideia*. Their name was itself based on the Latin *humanitas*, an educational and political ideal that was the intellectual basis of the entire movement. Renaissance humanism defined itself as an aspiration toward this ideal of virtue and wisdom.

*Humanitas* meant the development of human virtue, in all its forms, to its fullest extent. The term thus implied not only such qualities as are associated with the modern word humanity--understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy--but also such more aggressive characteristics as fortitude, judgment, prudence, eloquence, and even love of honour. Consequently the possessor of *humanitas* could not be merely a sedentary and isolated philosopher or man of letters but was of necessity a participant in active life. Just as action without insight was held to be aimless and barbaric, insight without action was rejected as barren and imperfect. *Humanitas* called for a fine balance of action and contemplation, a balance born not of compromise but of complementarity. The goal of such fulfilled and balanced virtue was political in the broadest sense of the word. The purview of Renaissance humanism included not only the education of the young but also the guidance of adults (including rulers) via philosophical poetry and strategic rhetoric. It included not only realistic social criticism but also utopian hypotheses, not only painstaking reassessments of history but also bold reshapings of the future. In short, humanism called for the comprehensive reform of culture, the transfiguration of what humanists termed the passive and ignorant society of the "dark" ages into a new order that would reflect and encourage the grandest human potentialities.

### The Roots of Humanism

The wellspring of humanitas was classical literature. Greek and Roman thought, available in a flood of rediscovered or newly translated manuscripts, provided humanism with much of its basic structure and method. For Renaissance humanists, there was nothing dated or outworn about the writings of Plato, Cicero, or Livy. Classical philosophy, rhetoric, and history were seen as models of proper method--efforts to come to terms, systematically and without preconceptions of any kind, with perceived experience. Classical virtue was not an abstract essence but a quality that could be tested in the forum or on the battlefield.

Humanism looked forward to a rebirth of a lost human spirit and wisdom. In the course of striving to recover it, however, the Humanists assisted in the consolidation of a new spiritual and intellectual outlook and in the development of a new body of knowledge. The effect of Humanism was to help men break free from the mental strictures imposed by religious orthodoxy, to inspire free inquiry and criticism, and to inspire a new confidence in the possibilities of human thought and creations.

### **Victorian Humanism**

It is particularly from the earlier humanism's spirit of liberating men (and women) from the strictures of religious orthodoxy and narrow ideologies that Victorian humanism takes its tone and direction. The classical ideals of virtue and wisdom are preserved but are united with the passion for progress that came to dominate much Victorian thinking. Victorian humanism is, simultaneously, a moral, a scientific, and a social movement, aspiring, precisely, to a deepening of the human spirit's search for its own nature.