

Ten things you probably shouldn't do when talking to strangers about Humanism

Imagine you've just met someone new and for some reason it's come up that you are a Humanist. It happens. Perhaps you've let it slip that you're on your way to a Humanist meeting and that you just stopped by the market to pick up some juice along the way. Regardless of how it happens, the stereotypical reaction to this sort of admission is, "What's Humanism?" The good news is that you now have a perfect opportunity share your philosophy with someone new.

The bad news is that most of us aren't sure of what to say when asked about Humanism. We know we should focus on the positive, but it's so much easier to talk about the things we are not. To help you overcome these natural tendencies, I've compiled a list of ten things you probably shouldn't do when talking to strangers about Humanism.

1) Don't expect a negative reaction

Most people have a positive initial reaction to the word Humanist. They want to like what you are going to say and chances are that they are going to agree with pretty much everything except our rejection of the supernatural. Don't ruin their good impression of our philosophy by assuming they are going to react negatively to it. Keep in mind, there's a fairly good chance that the person you are talking to is a Humanist and just doesn't know it yet. Expect the best and allow them to surprise you.

2) Don't Debate

Don't start a debate and don't bait them into one just to show off your superior critical and rational thinking skills. It's rude. They asked you to explain Humanism and that's what you should do. Try to be nice. Answer their questions as best you can and try not to make them feel stupid or inferior in the process.

3) Don't make it complicated

We Humanists tend to get wordy. When asked to define Humanism we will often launch into a review of modern history complete with references to the ancient Greeks and the Humanists of the Renaissance. The problem is that all these things don't help people understand what Humanism is. Do your best to keep it simple and don't go into obscure details unless you are asked for them and the person you are talking to turns out to be a geek just like you.

4) Don't fail to define Humanism

The very first thing out of your mouth should be a short and quick definition of Humanism. Practice so you will have one ready. The American Humanist Association defines Humanism as "a progressive philosophy of life, that without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity." If that seems too wordy try this: Humanism is about being a good person for the sake of being a good person.

5) Don't talk about god

Most people, including most religious people, have very little interest in talking about whether or not gods exist. They didn't ask you for your views about god. They asked you about Humanism. Stick to talking about the philosophy unless you are specifically asked about whether or not you believe. If they don't ask you if you believe or not, then they don't care if you do or not because they consider that information irrelevant. If you go on and on about something you claim you don't believe in and that the other person thinks is irrelevant, you will either bore them, or annoy them or both.

What's really interesting is that you don't even have to make our rejection of the supernatural explicit. People understand immediately that god is missing as soon as you don't invoke some sort of deity or religion as the basis for our morality. Don't assume you are talking to a religious person who cares deeply about god. Most people don't and you may just be surprised by how excited and relieved your new 'friend' gets at finding someone who considers the concept of god and religion irrelevant enough to not bring it up.

6) Don't make it about them

They did not ask you to critique their personal beliefs. If you want them to question their beliefs, the best way to do that is to have them to consider yours. If you stick to talking about what you believe in and value, they will do the hard work of questioning their beliefs on their own. Don't interrupt that by critiquing their beliefs for them. Not only is it bad form it will also make them defensive, that is counterproductive to what you really are hoping for, which is that they will start to think that you are actually making sense.

7) Don't say "that's stupid"

If it turns out the person you are talking to cares deeply about a god, reject the impulse to tell them you think their idea of god is stupid. You can claim all you want that you aren't calling them stupid; you are just labeling their ideas stupid. It doesn't matter. Everyone knows that if you think someone's ideas are stupid, you probably also think they are stupid. Keep your eyes on the prize. You aren't going to convert them so the least you can do is show them how wonderful Humanists are by being nice despite our differences.

8) Don't denigrate religion – any religion

They didn't ask you for your views on god or to hear a diatribe about organized religion. They were simply curious about Humanism and wanted to learn what it is. Most people think denigrating religion is offensive, even if they agree with you. Unless they ask you for your specific opinion on a specific religion, keep your views to yourself. You don't feel compelled to go on and on about why Little Red Riding Hood is not a very good morality tale. At least I hope you don't. Going on and on about any other fairy tale is just as pointless and annoying.

9) Don't talk politics

We Humanists tend to have strong political opinions. But just as they didn't ask you for your opinion on god, or religion, they also didn't ask you for your opinion on politics. It isn't relevant to the question of what Humanism is unless they ask you how Humanists

feel about a particular political issue. If this does come up, they are usually going to ask you about our opinion on abortion at which point you can safely assume your audience is religious and they are now trying to find fault with what you are saying since they are finding themselves agreeing with you. And that scares them. In which case you're doing a good job. Keep it up.

10) Don't forget to talk about our morality

The most attractive thing about Humanism is our morality. And yet most of us would rather talk to strangers about the existence or non-existence of god. Don't make this mistake. Talk about morality for the sake of morality. Most people consider this to be the most important topic we Humans can ever discuss. You don't need to go into the fact that it is without god. People understand that if it is without supernaturalism that it is without god. And if you are being good for the sake of being good then god clearly isn't motivating you to be good. The most exciting part about talking to people about morality is that if it turns out your audience is irreligious; they will at this point get really excited and want to become your friend. It happens to me ALL THE TIME!

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