Why Democracy Needs Humanism

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"The aspirations of democracy are based on the notion of an informed citizenry," Ann Druyan once observed. The remark feels less like an inspirational flourish than a diagnosis of our present moment. Democratic societies now ask their citizens to navigate pandemics, artificial intelligence, climate modeling, and geopolitical instability—subjects that require not instinct but literacy, not slogans but sustained reasoning. When scientific understanding erodes, democracy does not simply wobble. It begins to lose its ballast.

That concern animated the Humanists International General Assembly and the International Humanist Conference, held July 4–6 at d'Coque in Luxembourg City. Organized in partnership with AHA Lëtzebuerg—the Alliance of Humanists, Atheists & Agnostics in Luxembourg—the gathering featured the theme "From Awareness to Action: Strengthening Open Societies through Scientific Literacy." What might once have sounded like an academic slogan instead felt urgent. Across continents, participants described the same pattern: misinformation metastasizing online, expertise reframed as elitism, and democratic institutions strained by distrust.

Humanists International, the global representative body for organized humanism, convened more than 80 delegates from over 50 countries. The diversity of contexts was striking. Delegates came from liberal democracies wrestling with polarization, from regions where superstition can carry violent consequences, and from societies where secular voices operate under legal and cultural pressure. Yet a common thread emerged: scientific literacy is not peripheral to democracy. It is structural.

(Recordings of the conference are available by clicking here.)

The conference opened with welcome remarks from Bob Reuter, President of AHA Lëtzebuerg, and Andrew Copson, then-President of Humanists International. The keynote address by Christian Meyers set a bracing tone. Titled “Obscurantism strikes back? Anti-Science & Anti-Democracy as two sides of the same coin,” the talk framed anti-science movements not as isolated cultural phenomena but as political strategies. When evidence becomes negotiable and expertise suspect, democratic deliberation weakens. Science and democracy share a reliance on open inquiry, criticism, and revision. Undermine one, and the other grows fragile.

Clemens Lintschinger followed by arguing that democracies require robust scientific cultures capable of absorbing critique without collapsing into cynicism. Scientific institutions, he suggested, are healthiest when they welcome scrutiny. But in an environment saturated with bad-faith attacks, even legitimate criticism can be weaponized. The challenge is to preserve intellectual openness without surrendering to epistemic chaos.

If the early sessions diagnosed systemic threats, later panels shifted toward practice. Monica Belițoiu described an initiative that transforms a simple calendar into a tool against misinformation, linking historical dates to scientific discoveries and critical reflection. In rural Guatemala, David Pineda outlined science education programs designed to reach communities that often lack access to quality instruction. Dennis Fink demonstrated interactive, hands-on shows that invite audiences to experience skepticism rather than merely hear about it.

Dr. Leo Igwe’s presentation underscored the stakes in stark terms. In parts of Africa, accusations of witchcraft still fuel persecution and violence. His “Information Theory of Change” argues that scientific literacy is not an abstract civic virtue but a protective shield. Superstitious belief, when reinforced by social and institutional forces, can destroy lives. Teaching critical thinking becomes, in that context, a form of human rights advocacy.

Louis Krieger presented “Scienteens Lab,” workshops designed to engage teenagers and nurture curiosity at an age when identity and worldview take shape. Sudesh Ghoderao spoke about training programs for educators and independent assessment opportunities aimed at fostering scientific mindsets among students. Hanna Siemaszko examined how emotion and storytelling can amplify science communication, acknowledging that facts alone rarely travel far without narrative vehicles. Ann Kiefer illustrated how humor—through Science Slams—can transform academic research into accessible public engagement. Michèle Weber, representing the Luxembourg National Research Fund, discussed efforts to humanize science communication by integrating empathy into outreach. Boris van der Ham’s “Human for All Seasons” presentation tied these strands together, situating scientific literacy within a broader secular humanist life-stance that links evidence, human dignity, and democratic resilience.

Between sessions and long after formal discussions ended, conversations continued in hallways and at evening events, including a gala dinner at La Table du Belvédère. Delegates traded stories about cross-border challenges: the erosion of trust in institutions, the manipulation of digital platforms, the entanglement of nationalism and religious identity, and the difficulty of sustaining public reasoning in fractured media ecosystems. The refrain was consistent. Democracy does not collapse only through coups. It can corrode slowly when citizens lose shared standards of evidence.

The General Assembly on July 6 shifted the focus to institutional governance. Andrew Copson stepped down as president, and Maggie Ardiente was elected to lead Humanists International into its next chapter. New board members—Monica Beliţoiu of Romania, Nina Fjeldheim of Norway, and Fraser Sutherland of Scotland—joined the leadership. The transition symbolized continuity rather than rupture: a generational handoff within a movement attempting to adapt to accelerating global

change.

One of the Assembly's most consequential actions was the adoption of the Luxembourg Declaration on Artificial Intelligence and Human Values, drafted by Humanists UK with contributions from experts and member organizations. The declaration outlines ten principles, including human judgment, democratic governance, transparency, protection from harm, shared prosperity, and responsibility to future generations. At a moment when artificial intelligence is reshaping labor markets, public discourse, and even creative production, the declaration seeks to anchor technological advancement in human-centered ethics. It insists that tools should extend human flourishing, not eclipse accountability or autonomy.

The 2024 Distinguished Services to Humanism honors were awarded to Luis del Castillo of Peru, Gaylene Middleton of New Zealand, and Andrew Copson of the United Kingdom. The tributes emphasized sustained commitment—decades of advocacy paired with institution-building. Ideals endure only when translated into durable structures.

Travel grants enabled participation from delegates who might otherwise have been excluded, reinforcing a practical commitment to inclusivity. The closing announcement carried the gathering's momentum forward: the next Humanists International General Assembly will convene in Ottawa, Canada, in August 2026, in partnership with Humanist Canada. Martin Frith, President of Humanist Canada, welcomed the global community to the forthcoming event.

Yet the true takeaway from Luxembourg was not logistical but philosophical. Scientific literacy emerged not as a technical objective but as a democratic necessity. In an era of algorithmic amplification and ideological fragmentation, the habits cultivated by science—skepticism, tolerance for ambiguity, commitment to evidence—double as civic virtues. Humanism, as articulated across the conference, frames those habits within a broader ethical commitment to human freedom and flourishing.

If democracy depends on informed citizens, then scientific literacy is not merely educational policy. It is democratic defense. Luxembourg offered no illusions about the scale of the challenge. But it offered something more durable than alarm: a network of institutions and individuals determined to move from awareness to action.

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