

Are there any humanist charities?

There are humanist charities. Humanists UK is one example and there are similar organisations in countries all around the world. The question above, however, is normally focussed on charity work connected with the fight against poverty and disease, like that carried out by religious charities such as Christian Aid, Muslim Aid, and CAFOD.



The humanist response is typically that, with the existence of so many good **secular charities** working to improve global health and wellbeing (charities which are not tied to any particular worldview), there is no need for humanists to set up their own.

‘Most humanists prefer to work for good causes with others (of all faiths and none) and to donate time or money to charities that do not discriminate on grounds of religion (or non-religion) or promote one particular worldview.’

Humanists UK

Some examples of secular charities:

- Age UK
- Amnesty International
- Fairtrade Foundation
- Friends of the Earth
- Oxfam
- Medecins Sans Frontiers
- Water Aid
- UNICEF

There have been specifically humanist charities in the past when there was an unmet need for services for non-religious people. For example, when sheltered housing for older people, adoption agencies, and counselling services were dominated by religious charities, Humanists UK set up charities that worked in those fields. When specifically humanist provision was no longer required, they merged with larger, mainstream charities. In the 21st century, Humanists UK has continued to create new services, such as non-religious pastoral support and apostate support programmes, to once again address unmet needs in wider society.



While humanist organisations tend to focus their resources on issues of specific importance to humanists (often in areas where they believe non-religious people are treated unfairly), individual humanists will often support a much wider range of charitable causes.



Naomi Phillips is the Director of Policy and Advocacy at The British Red Cross. She has previously worked for the charities Mind and Breast Cancer Now.

‘If you’re a humanist you want to make things better for other people and society as well as yourself. So you could quite easily see humanists campaigning for human rights, for fairer politics, and environmental causes. I don’t think any non-religious person or humanist should be pigeonholed, or that we should assume that they’d be very limited in what they care about. It will be just as diverse as anybody else.’

Case study: Humanist Street Care

Some humanists devote their time and attention to helping individuals in need in their local community.

Since 2011, Humanist Society Scotland has been running a soup kitchen in Glasgow. Every Thursday evening, plus some Sundays, around ten volunteers set up a stall on the pavement at the same location in the city centre. Tea, coffee, soft drinks, and hot chocolate are made available, plus goodies such as crisps, biscuits, and cake, all supplied by the volunteers.

Starting out with a handful of enthusiasts from the Glasgow Humanist Group, the numbers involved in operating the soup kitchen have grown considerably. Now, every month almost 100 volunteers declare their availability and are allocated a slot. Once the service became firmly established, major food outlets including M&S, Lidl, Prêt, Sainsbury's, and Greggs proved highly receptive to overtures for any surplus items they might have. As a consequence, it is not unusual for ten or more crates of bread, fruit, sandwiches, and pastries to be distributed. Nothing is wasted. At the end of the session, after being open for business for an hour or so, we deliver any leftovers to hostels for homeless people.



Those who visit the soup kitchen are of a wide variety of backgrounds, nationalities, and ages. Numbers vary and are unpredictable, but we rarely see fewer than thirty and frequently considerably more than that. Problems they are facing include homelessness, family breakdown, alcohol and drug misuse, prostitution, poverty, immigration difficulties, and outstanding court warrants. A few may be mentally ill or disinhibited by substance

misuse. Some travel amazingly long distances to be there. Many come as much for the companionship and social networking the venue provides as for the food and drink on offer. No attempt is made to pry into any individual's personal circumstances, including their beliefs. We provide a sympathetic, non-judgemental ear to what they have to say.



The project began after a cohort of Humanist Society Scotland members felt that more could be done to promote the practical dimensions of humanism. The background of the volunteers is as varied as that of the clients, but there is a shared sense of enthusiasm for the project. Each of us comes away from a session feeling that the time has been very well spent, irrespective of what the infamous West of Scotland weather might have thrown at us. The cheery banter with the clients, many of whom have become well known over the years, is a constant source of light relief for both volunteers and clients alike. Put simply, it is great fun. Right from the start, the intention has been to keep it that way. Pains continue to be taken to prevent the sessions from ever becoming a chore. It is a stimulating and rewarding way to spend an evening.

Bob Scott, Humanist Society Scotland
www.humanism.scot/get-involved/streetcare



The two fights

Much of the work carried out by humanist organisations today relates to promoting freedom of religion and belief, equality for non-religious people, and ethical issues where humanist beliefs are at odds with those of many organised religious groups. That is where such organisations believe they can best make a specific contribution towards human rights.

However, these are not the only areas that concern individual humanists. Humanists are often active campaigners for human welfare, peace, and the protection of the environment, and against poverty, violence, and injustice.

Jaap van Praag, the former chair of the Dutch Humanist Association, described a distinction between the '**little fight**' and the '**great fight**'.

The 'little fight' describes the legitimate but limited interests of humanists themselves: campaigning against religious privilege in society and hostility towards the non-religious. The 'great fight' represents the more universal challenges that humanists believe must be overcome for the benefit of all people. This is the work that needs to be done to build a society in which every citizen can make free and informed choices about what makes their lives happy and meaningful, and has the opportunity to live out their lives accordingly. It is a world in which freedom and democracy flourish and authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are a thing of the past. It is a world in which we have minimised the restrictions placed on human beings through poverty, war, and disease.

Which fight is the priority depends on where humanists find themselves. In many parts of the world, the 'little fight' is still necessary. Non-religious people still face prejudice and even violence across the globe, and discrimination exists in many forms even in Europe and the US (in schools, hospitals, prisons, politics, and the armed forces). However, for many humanists, the 'great fight' is now where they focus their attention.



Jaap van Praag (1911-1981)

'Where humanists give priority to the little fight, humanism will more often be defined in negative terms... Where humanists give priority to the great fight for human rights (for everybody, but especially for the most vulnerable people), for peace and for a sustainable economy and a clean and beautiful natural environment, it becomes anachronistic to define humanism as necessarily non- or even anti-religious.'

Peter Derkx, *Handbook of Humanism*

This 'great fight' is being fought, often more quietly, by many humanists in their own individual ways. It is a fight that is often carried out independently of the work of humanist organisations. Here, dialogue and cooperation between liberals and humanitarians from all worldviews are of the utmost importance in response to those tasks that are crucial to the future of humanity.

From *Introducing Humanism by Humanists UK*