

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*