
A humanist discussion of... HUMAN RIGHTS

In October 2000 the Human Rights Act 1998 came into force, bringing human rights into the news. Humanists have always supported human rights, which have been called "Values for a Godless Age"

For centuries, humanists and other non-religious people have been at the heart of work to improve human lives by implementing human rights. In 1791 the deist Thomas Paine, who said, "**My country is the world, my religion is to do good**", wrote *The Rights of Man*, the first book to argue for universal human rights. The early feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, who was far from conventional in her life and religious beliefs (nowadays we might call her a radical religious humanist) wrote in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) on the rights of girls and women to education and independence. In the nineteenth century, non-religious people worked alongside pioneering Christians to get rid of slavery and child labour and to spread information about contraception, often opposed by the Churches who based their disregard for human rights on Biblical teachings. In the twentieth century, humanists were amongst the founders of the United Nations and other organisations concerned with human rights, and humanists such as Karl Popper and Bernard Crick have championed democracy and an "open society" in which all can participate. The International Humanist and Ethical Union have been very active in supporting the empowerment of oppressed people all over the world.



**Fighters for rights –
Thomas Paine and Mary
Wollstonecraft**

Humanist ethics

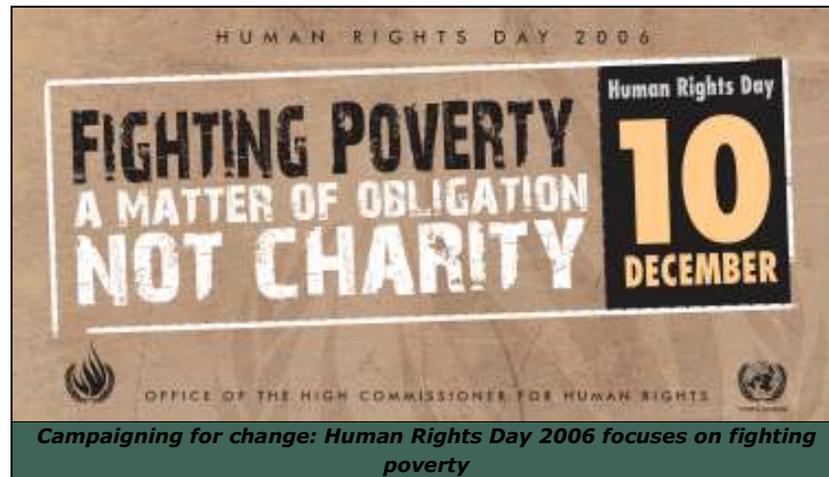
Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have, and look to human beings and human institutions to ensure these (for humanists are convinced that no deity will). The basic humanist principles underlying their support for human rights are: **respect for all humans as worthy of equal consideration; support for freedom of belief and expression; and tolerance for all beliefs and ways of life as long as they do not harm others.**

So humanists oppose racism, sexism, torture, unfair imprisonment, persecution because of beliefs, and vast inequalities in wealth and education, all of which stand in the way of overall human welfare and progress. Human rights conventions, declarations and acts are attempts to **guarantee decent treatment for all human beings.**

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has become a universal standard for defending and promoting human rights. The declaration, accepted by all member states of the United Nations, is based on belief **"in the**

dignity and worth of the human person" and requires all states, groups and individuals to observe and promote respect for rights and freedoms. This international agreement on how we should treat each other, and how states should treat their citizens, supports the humanist viewpoint that **there are important moral values shared by all rational people**, regardless of race, culture or religion, because they are **based on our shared human nature and needs**. For example, no one wants to be murdered, so murder is wrong, so we grant each other the right not to be murdered. No one would like to be a slave, so slavery is wrong, so human beings declare that it is a human right not to be enslaved.

Human Rights Day, every year on 10th December, marks the adoption of the Universal Declaration, an event endorsed by the BHA, International Humanist and Ethical Union. It is celebrated around the globe that "All human beings are born equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."



Some problems with human rights

While the rights embodied in the Human Rights Act, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) are admirable, the issue of human rights raises some interesting questions and problems.

It is relatively easy to get states and individuals to agree on sets of rights, but can be quite difficult to get states and individuals to **enforce** these rights, and abuses of human rights such as unfair discrimination, torture, prisoners of conscience and war crimes continue.

How much should one intervene in the affairs of foreign countries to impose human rights?

Would intervention be an infringement of their right to do things their way?

Slavery is condemned as an abuse of human rights (though in the past it was widely accepted), but it can be hard to persuade desperately poor families not to sell themselves or their children into slavery (do they have the right to do so?), and it can be hard to persuade richer people and companies not to take advantage of the cheap goods produced by slaves.

Rights usually entail a duty or responsibility to ensure those rights, and have to be paid for and enforced in some way. One person's rights may conflict with another person's.

How do we balance rights that clash, as they often do?

A humanist would probably weigh up the consequences and give priority to those rights which **maximise human happiness and welfare**. Selfish or frivolous claims could be dismissed if they would lead to social disadvantages or infringe the rights of others. For example, it would be difficult to justify as a human right the claim that the state must assist everyone to choose the sex of their unborn child if that would lead to a serious imbalance of the sexes in the population or mean that ill people went untreated because health resources became overstretched.

Your rights

You might be interested in some of the rights you now have by law. For example:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."
(Human Rights Act 1998, Article 9)

"No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."
(Human Rights Act 1998, Part 2, First Protocol, Article 2)

Children's Rights

In 1989 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a Convention on the Rights of the Child, reminding all parties to the convention that the child (under eighteen years old) is "entitled to special care and assistance" and that "**the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the charter of the UN, and in particular the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.**"

Rights that might particularly interest you include:

"...to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." *(Article 12)*

"...the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers..."
(Article 13)

"...the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development." *(Article 27)*

"The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in the cultural life and the arts." *(Article 31)*

"The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their full potential..." *(Article 29)*

Questions to think about and discuss

- o How much are you prepared to make sacrifices to safeguard other people's human rights? For example, would you pay more for chocolate, or buy only "fair trade" chocolate instead of less expensive chocolate produced by slaves (some of whom are children)?
- o Do children's rights ever clash with parents' or other adults' rights? Does the right of parents to "education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions" clash with children's rights to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds"? If so, what do you think should be done about it?
- o Do human rights clash with animal rights? What should we do if they do?
- o How far do you think tax-payers are obliged to ensure the right to an adequate standard of living for all? How would we decide what that standard would be?
- o How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- o How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Further reading

Other BHA briefings: *Thinking about ethics* ; *Discrimination and Prejudice* ; *Humanists and the UN* ; *Animal Welfare*

Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), *What is Humanism?* (BHA)

Philosopher Richard Norman's talk on human rights given at a BHA conference, 2003

Human Rights Act, an introduction (also free from Home Office, on 0845 600 1151)

- All available at www.humanism.org.uk. See also *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1990)

Some useful websites

www.antislavery.org - for news and campaigns on modern slavery
www.amnesty.org.uk - for information, resources, news and campaigns on human rights
www.iheu.org for International Humanist's recent campaigns on human rights
www.citizen21.org.uk - Charter 88 's website, campaigning for a Bill of Rights for the UK
www.un.org/events/humanrights - the UN's website on human rights and poverty
www.ukpoet.cjb.net - for a full version of the Global Village article ("If the world was a village of 1000 people...") and the story of its origins.
www.newint.org for the magazine's article on religion and children's rights in [issue 370](#)

For teachers

- o *Humanist Perspectives 2* (BHA) contains a more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers.
- o *Why Human Rights? II* (Team Video 020 8960 5536)
- o Resources produced by the Council for Education in World Citizenship (020 7919 5090)
- o *Partners in Rights activity pack* (£10 from Save the Children, 01752 202301)
- o Peter Wright (ed) *The Maths and Human Rights Resource Book - Bringing human rights into the secondary mathematics classroom* (Amnesty International, 01788 54 55 53)
- o *Our World Our Rights* (Amnesty International, 01788 54 55 53)
- o *Just Right - CD-ROM* (Amnesty International, 01788 54 55 53)
- o *Amnesty International Assembly Pack* (Amnesty International, 01788 54 55 53)

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