

Humanist Tasks in the New Europe

PROFESSOR JAAP VAN PRAAG

THERE IS a very old joke about a storm in the Channel. Ferries couldn't cross and the telegraph cables were damaged. Next day the British papers appeared with sensational headlines. They said: 'Continent isolated!' British insularism is notorious. The RPA wants to orientate itself towards Europe, however; notably in the field of humanism.

It goes without saying that one of the tasks in the new Europe is to promote mutual understanding. Humanists can further exchange of concepts, publications and approaches among the Humanist movements. They can also try to spread knowledge of the specific problems and life-styles of the various countries. Last but not least they may strive at a common effort to establish an open, democratic and just society in a united Europe. The latter includes a common democratic control of European institutions and economic powers. It requires the subordination of nationalism and the integration of Europe in a world system, also to the benefit of developing countries. Moreover, it requires an ingenious approach in order to further peace and equity in the world. But all this is not so much a matter of techniques and methods but of changes in public opinion. And Humanists can contribute to it by their impact upon public morality.

But does this impact really exist? And if so, to what degree and in which area? In the modern development towards secularization Humanists have played their part. They were the promoters of enlightenment and of a secular morality. They contributed quite a bit to the liberation of the human mind and of human behaviour. The RPA may here be mentioned with particular praise. However, immediately after World War Two it was already clear that change of attitude is not only a matter of enlightenment and understanding, but of personal experience and inter-human relations. Hence the development of counselling practices in the context of social service. And even these — as it became clear during the 'sixties — could not really function very well when

unconnected to social action. So in the late 'sixties social action became the issue, particularly with the BHA, the DHL and the BHL. Humanists campaigned for the review of marriage and divorce laws, for women's liberation, for acknowledgement of homosexuality, for a realistic approach to the drug problem, and so on. Even before this though, they made a stand for population control, abolition of nuclear weapons, social equity and conservation of the environment, to mention only a few main areas.

It is an impressive list but, for one reason or another, it did not quite work out as it should have done. Sometimes it looks as if the impact of the Humanist movement is losing strength, while the Humanist idea is spreading, with humanism becoming a keyword in all progressive thinking — even in theology. At the same time the movement continuously faces financial catastrophe; not only because of permanent inflation but also because of the continuing decrease in membership. The general trend is to stick to traditional patterns, every now and then alternated by ambitious statements. But what is the use of ambitious statements, if they fail to get through to the public? If they lack depth of thought or originality they are not even harmless; they devalue their case and give the movement a misplaced feeling of achievement.

*

To resume the situation for a moment. I started by considering new tasks for Humanists in a united Europe. Some of these, for instance in the sphere of information, are feasible for the movement as it is. Others however, concerning the establishment of a democratic and just society, seem to lie beyond our reach. They cannot be achieved by mere declarations, but require a change of public spirit. And this is not only a matter of enlightenment. I hope I will not be misunderstood on this: Rationalism is of course the core of Humanist thinking. But in order to free the way for Rationalism, other layers of the personality must be integrated into a coherent whole. This touches on a topical problem of the Humanist movement that is more far reaching than our rôle in a new Europe. In my opinion it is the problem of the survival of the Humanist movement as a living force today. There is in the movement nowadays a great deal of uncertainty as to the nature and usefulness of Humanist activities. On the one hand we have a call for action, on the other renewed appeal to reflection. Often it looks as if these two currents are irreconcilable and sometimes this is in fact the case. Many Humanists are of the opinion that in these days of unknown menaces direct action only is useful. They have an aversion to Humanist

theorizing, which they consider to be a luxury. In this respect they are very much like Christians, who also just managed to save their practical action from the wreck of traditional faith. But other Humanists put the emphasis on reflection, the accounting for thought and action, respect for others and reasoning consultation. The activists often aim at a broad movement, the theorists at a small elite.

Nowadays radical social action is on the order paper. This action is motivated by unacceptable experiences in our present society. It is justified — often unconsciously — by modern sociology. Action is directed towards the change of concepts, behaviour, situations and structures, and sometimes towards a radical revolution of the social order. Our society has reached deadlock — in the opinion of these activists — and this leads them to a sometimes spasmodic effort at a revaluation of all existing beliefs. Mostly they start from an optimistic view of man. If we can abolish the frustrating conditions in which man lives, we can expect everything to come right. Self-conceit, selfishness, lust for power, jealousy won't any longer play any part. Power, coercion and surely violence will be superfluous. A very old dream. . . .

That does not alter the fact that we do live in a society that produces much disturbing behaviour which it then rejects. It is also a society that alienates man from the community, from others and from himself; and which pretends to be astonished at the conflicts that result from this alienation. In the light of this, a Humanist must often feel in sympathy with critical action. This is in line with the Humanist tradition. Humanism is traditionally in defence of human dignity and the humanization of society. At the present time this means that Humanists cannot remain indifferent to radical action. So there is a distinct tendency everywhere in the movement to identify Humanist activities with critical social activity.

However, the ideological Humanists, those who put the stress on reflection, oppose this tendency. They emphasize the need for a rational account of human behaviour. They point to individual problems which we must all, here and now, try to solve, even if we cannot change existing circumstances. They consider it an important challenge for Humanists to further critical thought, respect for others and readiness for consultation. Some of them stress the basic need for a religious dimension in life. Religion then is not conceived as some form of creed, but as the acknowledgement of the inscrutability of existence and the notion that man can somehow experience all-embracing reality and draw power from it.

The obvious objection of the activists is: improve yourself first. Start with the world. What is the use of rationality and reflection when

obscure power policy causes death and destruction; when two thirds of humanity perish from famine and disease; and when all around us prejudice, narrowmindedness, injustice and repressive intolerance make life unbearable? What is the use of helping one man, if circumstances impede his humanity and that of thousands of other men? We have had enough and to spare of theory. Now it is time to change society. We have in fact sufficiently discussed our assumptions and what has been the use of it? Is it not clear what should be done? This is the end of the parish and the beginning of the shaping of a humane world.

Am I wrong if I state that this is a topical discussion in our movement? Or must I assume that there are parts of the movement that still indulge in the ecstasy of proving that morality without God is possible and even preferable; or that traditional faith tends to corrupt man (as by the way many other doctrines do)? Do we realize that both these points are also made within the churches, particularly by modern theologians? And, what is more important, that they are engaged in the same discussion as we are, or should be? They too have to consider the relation between thought and action. And we must be careful not to fall into the rearguard of progressive developments. In my own case I doubt if there is really such a complete dichotomy between humanistic thought and action. I never believed that, and I have always stressed their coherence. Fertile thought inspires action; fertile action requires thoughtfulness. Moreover, if Humanist reflection is not needed in practice, it is not clear why there should be a Humanist movement at all. In that case one should envisage the consequences and liquidate the organization. Those Humanist associations which seek only to become action groups are in effect indulging in sectarianism. I cannot believe that a Humanist organization would be needed for that end. It would not only be superfluous, but ineffective. For specific activist groups fulfill their task much better than Humanist organizations ever could.

But a Humanist organization does have meaning, precisely in terms of action. It can give a more coherent base to radical activities. To that end an appeal can be made to the mutual understanding and the continual cooperation that exist in a fixed setting. Action groups carry out part of the task and when that is achieved, often disband. Naturally a Humanist organization is also concerned with half of the task, but its coherence consists in its consciousness of the meaning of human existence in society. This places individual and community in a Humanistic framework. And so Humanists can contribute something specific to the development of both and can thus provide an impulse and a standard of Humanist relations for individuals and groups.

These considerations are by no means merely academic. They influence the carrying out of Humanist activities. We are living in a world in which emancipation, human deployment and resistance to the consumer society and pollution of the environment are increasingly evident. This often leads to stubborn confrontation and conflict. It is sometimes said that the harmony model is replaced by the conflict model. But what does that mean? One must admit that in the harmony-model there is a definite tendency to obscure real conflict by meaningless formulas. Naturally the conflicts survive beneath the surface and provide a destructive element. This may be the result of the so-called harmony model. But what about the conflict model? Does it mean that conflicts must be fought out to the bitter end? It is often conceived in that way. But is it a useful conception?

Surely conflicts should not be obscured. But Galtung, who is often looked on as the father of the conflict model, definitely did not mean that conflicts should be unreservedly fought out. This is clear if one considers that he developed his ideas in relation to the conflict of world powers. What he aims at is conflict control. This means that the conflict is not resolved by the destruction of both parties involved. The same applies to conflicts within society. And that could easily happen. Our structures are so intricate that very little is needed to disturb them so badly that society would collapse completely. An agrarian society can stand quite a bit and quickly recover. But disturbance of our technological society can easily bring catastrophic results. It obviously means the end of everything that makes human relations possible, and because this is unbearable, it can only lead to dictatorship.

*

Perhaps there are situations in which violence can only be met by violence. But as long as that is not exclusively the case, and even then, conflict control is of the essence. Humanists can play an important part in this. Provided that they can indeed contribute something specific; and something specific can only consist of their view of man and society. If a Humanist association is to mean something, then it should not be a diluted action group, but a purposeful movement, based on Humanist conceptions. Here lies the link between idea and action, that is indispensable for a Humanist movement. The idea must go to the very root, before action can rise from it. But which ideas go to the root?

There are various approaches to current problems, but the Humanist one is obviously to start with man. In a radically changing society he is often involved in an inner crisis. Traditional patterns do not any longer apply; everything seems possible and this everything always

involves danger. Modern man is menaced by destruction. Very few can find a foothold. People are asking, Who am I, what should I do? Man obtains identity in relation to society. In some periods, like our own, it can be difficult to discover the right direction for one's existence. Alienation is the one result—from society, from others, and from oneself. Alienation leads to poor self-awareness, and thus to psychic ill-health. These weaknesses of personality produce a great dependence on the group in which one lives. Hence rapid alterations of fashion and utterance, together with a remarkable conformity within this group. On the other hand self-confidence produces other-directedness; one understands another person, and may contribute something to him, without denying oneself. Self-confidence and real partnership are the conditions for a healthy development. But lack of self-awareness evaporates all one's energy, in the desperate attempt to be someone. Authoritarian people don't have a surplus of self-confidence—they have a shortage of it. The more threatened they feel, the more authoritatively they behave. This applies both to traditionalists and to progressives. So confrontation often sharpens a conflict until its solution becomes impossible.

All this greatly affects the nature and practice of social activity. A crisis of identity leads to childish patterns of behaviour, such as fantasies of omnipotence. One thinks oneself capable of stopping time and of changing the world. Anti-authoritarian attitudes so easily become authoritarian themselves. On the other hand lack of self-consciousness in authoritarian people can easily lead either to the abuse of everything new, or to a blind worship of youth. The opposites are extreme. But as a contribution to the meaning of existence, the traditionalist can be a valuable counterpart to the radical, while the radical can usefully react upon tradition. Therefore it is the task of Humanists to further the consciousness of identity in all activities.

However, identity cannot replace power. And power is needed to change alienating structures; be it only moral power. But also material power requires a moral basis to become really effective and only self-conscious people can effectively change alienating structures. Self-consciousness, however, depends on the notion of the meaning and the coherence of one's decisions. From that coherence itself originates the consciousness of identity within continuous change. The promotion of this process is not a luxury, but an indispensable condition for meaningful change of structures and real mental health. It demands as much reflection as action. Both of them are directed towards mental maturity and social renewal. Humanist ideas function in this context. They are not flags to be used to hit others on the head, but tokens of a common

philosophy. They find their expression, coherence and content in a humanistic picture of man and the world. This increases both their power and effect.

*

The fundamental question must now be faced: How does all this work out in practice? Of course these formulations can be expressed in meetings and discussions, in publications and conferences, by broadcast and television, through counselling and guidance and it is clear that the RPA for instance exercises its main responsibility in the field of publicity. However, the point is not to ventilate Humanist ideas, but to apply them. This means participation in the experience of others. One cannot approach them from outside — one must act in solidarity with them and their actions. One cannot effectively support people if one identifies totally with them. This applies both to Humanist education, to counselling, and to social action. They often merge or complete each other.

The Humanist as field-worker uses empathy in his social actions. But he will use his own standards as well. He will not force his opinion or his personal philosophy upon others, but he is quite capable of making a stand when necessary. The purpose of Humanist thought and action is enlightenment, maturity, independence, solidarity, improvement of individual and social relations. This must exclude manipulation of others for one's own philosophical or social aims. The Humanist movement as a whole will develop a policy for social change. But it will only be effective if the movement has its roots in the field, from which it is nourished.

The effective realization of such a programme is not possible in an abstract way. It is an emerging process between individuals, the movement and the field. The movement must be able to mobilize enough capable fieldworkers. It must try to create situations in which participants can co-operate and develop their capacities. This strengthens their self-confidence and prepares them for more difficult endeavours. At the same time it makes them more mature, both in personal and social relations. However, comparisons must continually be made between the needs in the field and the basic assumptions of our work, so that gradually a close connection can be established over broader areas of the population. In this way people will be influenced by humanism. Co-operation is the key word — co-operation with mental health workers, social workers and workers in the field of community development.

It must be admitted that modern theology is very near to this concept.

In spite of conservative forces within the churches modern theology is apparently the reflection of a new concept of church and faith and a new sense of man and the world. The new theology gave birth to a widespread horizontalism, as against the verticalism of traditional faith. Not the perspective of heaven but the reality of earth determines this new faith. A Christian now has his first commitment to his fellowmen. William Hamilton speaks of the experience of the absence of God, as against the absence of the experience of God. The God of the Old Testament is dead and will not return. He has annihilated himself in the death of Jesus, who is the lord of life. According to Thomas Alitzer God and man lost their identity and both of them are on the way towards a new identity in which God will be everything in everyone.

With Paul van Buren the idea of commitment enters into the scene. Harvey Cox develops a theology of social change: social action completes social service. The major sin is not pride or avidity, but indolence, inertness. Obedience and resignation are no longer the values of faith but a longing for equity. Exodus becomes a key word. Man is on the way towards a secular realm of freedom and love. Freedom is at stake, says Dorothea Solle, and it requires change, radical change of social structures. Richard Shaull wants to break through the continuity in order to realize a continuous humanization of society. The similarity between this new type of theology and progressive trends in Humanist thinking is remarkable. There too the issue of a good will that works in the world has become topical. There too the interrelation of individual consciousness and social structures has been appreciated. Both Christians and Humanists are bound to stress the importance of identity as a common human enterprise in their personal and social action, in their care for human beings and social structures.

In a world without God identity conceived as the realization of a common humanity provides meaning. It is directed towards freedom, fellowship, fulfillment. These are tokens of the evolution of man, even if, by some catastrophe, there were no future at all. They carry meaning in themselves, like love that serves for nothing but, notwithstanding, is self-sufficient. They create a coherence that Julian Huxley calls religious. The disappearance of God, he says, means a recasting of religion. And he defines religion as an organized scheme of thought, including the realities of the world and evolving life in relation to human destiny, held together against the cosmic background by a spirit of reverence. As Richard Shaull says: It is a theoretical project with which men can identify in their everyday life so that they don't live from day to day without meaning, but can account to themselves for ends and means.

Now it is time, I think, to consider where these explanations have led us. Not only our task in a new Europe, but our whole commitment in the present world depends on whether we can influence the realization of a more humane community. It is a question of responding adequately to the challenge of our time. This challenge includes the war in Vietnam, the violence and oppression in modern society, the dehumanization of a technological culture, the pollution of our environment, and lastly the quest for meaning and identity in a chaotic existence. For that matter a united Europe is not a goal in itself, but the means to a more effective solution of our common problems.

Our Humanist movement then, only functions according to its nature, if its voice expresses more real truth than other voices. Humanism can never exercise real influence if it represents an abstract idea. Its strength consists in its adequate solutions to real problems. If we really want to guide the transition towards a new culture, we must be prepared to try and establish a new quality of life. It will be a culture of fulfillment in material sobriety, and of festivity without abundance. Self-limitation, conservation of environment and social planning require a completely new approach. But Humanists must preserve their own identity. We may not neglect personal grief, in our fight against social abuse, nor may we overlook structural faults in concentrating on personal unhappiness. We must operate in a polarity of individual and social crisis.

All this means that Humanists do not have ready-made answers. Their contribution cannot be condensed into a simple slogan. They stand amidst social struggle, while aiming at personal fulfillment. It makes them, or should make them non-conformists in an unusual sense — rebels in all contexts: dissatisfied with present conditions, doubtful of future achievements. They fight in the service of reconciliation. Against hate they emphasize fellowship, against terror, humanity. Only by a revolution within the revolution, can it be insured that a really new structure is created, rather than a replacement of the old. We know that there is no ultimate goal for which present men may be sacrificed. At best there is growth, not of quantity but of quality. And we also know that the smallest results require immense and concerted effort.

Humanism requires an embracing vision. There are no quick ways to realize it. Clarity of ways and means is in the long run more effective than haste. Humanist achievements can only be established by a continuous and non-spectacular process. But it can give the Humanist movement a new impetus and indicate a way towards a Humanist contribution in a changing situation. This may sound too ambitious.

THE NEW EUROPE

But only ambitious programmes, properly carried out, provide sufficient motivation for their adherents.

I shall conclude with a little story that is attributed to the Flemish popular joker, Tyl Uilenspiegel. It is said that one day Tyl was on his way towards a small town. This was in the middle-ages and the gates would be closed by sunset. A peasant on a cart came along at full speed. For a moment he reined in his horse and asked if he could reach the town before darkness. 'Yes,' Uilenspiegel said, 'if you don't hurry'. The peasant shrugged his shoulders, thinking it one of Tyl's malicious jokes. He whipped up the horse and disappeared in a cloud of dust around a bend in the road. Tyl strolled steadily on. And after some ten minutes round another bend in the road he found the peasant. The cart was smashed against a tree, the horse crippled in a ditch, and the peasant despairing on the bank of the road. 'Now I must stay here for the night,' he screamed desperately. 'That's what I said,' replied Tyl. 'If you had driven slowly, you would have reached the town in time.' And he went on.