

THE HUMANIST OUTLOOK

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There are several distinguishable trends in the humanist tradition. How may they be identified, and what do they have in common which distinguishes them from non-humanist ways of thinking and living? Humanism is not bound up with any particular philosophy, and has indeed been upheld by idealist, materialist or naturalist, and existentialist philosophies. Nevertheless, what assumptions or postulates are implied in all humanist thinking?

An attempt to clarify the humanist position was made by the adoption of the 1966 (Paris) statement that runs as follows:

Ethical humanism is a complex response to the world of those who hold that man is selfdependent. It rejects absolutes and cannot be characteristically represented by any tabulation of statements.

Those that follow should be read as indication of what humanism stands for, rather than as a declaration of what humanism is.

- 1 Ethical humanism expresses a moral conviction; it is acceptance of responsibility for human life in the world.
- 2 It represents a way of life relying upon human capacities and natural and social resources.
- 3 Humanist morality starts with an acknowledgment of human interdependence and the need for mutual respect.
- 4 Ethical humanism calls for a significant existence made worthwhile through human commitment and acceptance, as a basis for enjoyment and fulfilment.
- 5 Man becomes human in society; society should provide conditions for the fullest possible development of each man.
- 6 Human development requires continuous improvement of the conditions of free inquiry and of an open society.
- 7 Scientific knowledge progressively established and applied is the most reliable means of improving welfare.
- 8 Human progress is progress in freedom of choice; human justice is the progressive realization of equality.
- 9 Justice does not exclude force, but the sole desirable use of force is to suppress the resort to force.
- 10 Ethical humanism affirms the unity of man and a common responsibility of all men for all men.

This paper was written for the meeting between the IHEU and the Vatican Secretariat for Unbelievers which should have taken place in June 1969, but had to be postponed, as some of the officers of the Vatican Secretariat were unable to attend in that particular period.

Nevertheless there is an unmistakable difference between several positivist (scientific), social, rationalist, and philosophical trends within humanism. What does connect them? The usual answer is: common attitudes and common commitments. But what does this answer properly mean? Humanists share many commitments with enlightened christians. And what about the attitudes? The various attitudes also cross the borderlines of the great philosophies and religions. For that reason one can sometimes notice that a humanist is called by a christian a virtual christian, and that a christian is called by a humanist a virtual humanist. But of course this does not really make sense. Therefore the question arises how humanism must be characterized?

Perhaps this can best be done by explaining its mental attitude that precedes all theory and practice. The conception mental attitude includes an element of directedness and commitment. Perhaps the common denominator of all humanism must be sought here; in this feeling of being led by a fundamental directive, that provides the point of departure for any philosophy, or view on life and the world, or personal and social practice.

One may have a certain conception, but a mental attitude is a characteristic of anybody's whole being. Together with the orientation towards life and the conceptions of man and the world that spring from such a point of departure it constitutes a moral conviction. So a moral conviction is a pattern of orientation in which a mental attitude provides a point of departure for a conception of man and the world. Humanism then in the modern sense is a moral conviction, based on man in his humanity that distinguishes him both from the divine and the animal. It aims at understanding life and the world, calling on human faculties (without relying on any particular revelation) and realizing the special character of a common humanity. This interpretation of the term humanism does not deny the humanistic character, let alone the humane character, of many variegations of creeds; however though they sometimes fully acknowledge the human, they are not based on it. Their point of departure is the divine, while autonomous humanism is characterized by its human origin. It loosens more and more the ties with any creedal conception, it places man not so much in a central position, but rather it accepts him as the only possible foundation of human living; it definitely turns to social life and empirical reality. Therefore it assumes more and more the character of an all-embracing moral conviction.

Yet again the question remains: Is it possible to formulate a common conception of the mental attitude that seems basical for all humanism? It must mean to try and discover the elements in modern humanism that precede any special interpretation of it, be it philosophical or practical. One can at least suggest some of these elements. The point is to find some indispensable postulates of humanist thinking. A postulate is not a (hypo)thesis, in that it should be proved by thought or experience, but rather a starting point that enables one to think and experience in a certain way. An attempt to formulate some of these starting-points is provided by the following set of postulates:

1 Equality. Men are of similar biological and mental structure. In view of this similarity the undeniable differences between all men appear irrelevant. They are conceived within a framework of fundamental equality. By this conception they live principally in a common (intersubjective) world.

2 Secularity. Men are part of and disposed for their world. Man springs from a reality of which he himself is a "natural" part. As such he is a junction of relations. But he is also a centre of action. As an intentional being he shapes his world both mentally and in reality.

3 Liberty. Men give significance to their lives by deciding in freedom. Freedom means of choice (be it "determined" or not). As a relatively indefinite being man must shape his life by self-determination and thus give his life human meaning.

4 "Fraternity". Men are designated for community; the community shapes the individual. Self-determination implies community. Self-determination in community pro-

vides for both the meaning of human life and a standard for (moral, social and theoretical) judgement.

5 Experience. The world can be experienced in identification and observation. Identification is synthetical and provides "religious" experience; observation is analytical and provides "knowledge". Identification and observation are complementary to one another and exclude one another.

6 Existence. World and men exist (that is: are perceptible, directly or indirectly) in indissoluble coherence. Whatever the philosophical interpretation of this phenomenon may be, men and world are conceived as interdependent. The world is a "human" world, and men are secular beings.

7 Completeness. The world is complete and does not indicate an upper or outer world. Completeness does not mean perfection, but it means that the world is not thought of as dependent on a creator, nor that there is an empty place, left vacant by an absent creator.

8 Evolution. The world is dynamic in its evolutionary and causal structure. The world is conceived as developing in lawful coherence. It is the formula of its dynamic character and enables men to live in and with reality and to act upon it.

This outline description of a humanist conception does by no means represent a picture of the infinite variety of humanist thinking and acting. It just aims at defining the common basis of all humanist convictions. On this basis however the most different structures can be erected. Since the Renaissance one can distinguish at least three, continually entwining lines of development; a more reflective line, a more social line, and a more scientific line. The reflective development goes particularly via German philosophy to e.g. Jaspers. It has a strongly moral, and (in a general sense) religious, woof; it is particularly occupied with education and counseling. The social line goes via Bentham, Comte and Marx to e.g. Mahabendra Nath Roy. It strives at formulating a humanist criterion of social action and is characterized by the triplet of inform, perform and reform. The empirical development goes mainly via Bacon, and the Anglo-saxon empiricists to logical positivism, linguistic analysis and various kinds of scientists. In this latter field psychologists like Fromm and Rogers, and a biologist like Huxley, stress the specific responsibility of the human species on the basis of its specific nature. In a broader sense modern thinking contributes to all three lines of humanist development. As well in the field of philosophy as in the field of science; that is both social sciences like history, psychology and sociology, and natural sciences like biology, physics and astronomy. Together they constitute a really modern picture of life and the world.

Humanism as considered in comparison with great religions does not provide final answers to fundamental questions. But how does it deal with the problems of evil, sorrow and death? What does it offer in the field of purpose, certainty and security? The first clarification that is needed here is that humanism does not pretend to give another answer to the same questions that are put by the traditional faiths, but it puts different questions. Man creates the world he lives in by his expectations and ideas and the ways in which he interprets and manages his experience. The humanist is not a christian stripped of his christian expectations and attitudes; he makes a different approach. Of course he cannot and does not deny evil, sorrow and death, but he conceives them as the natural seamy side of his aspirations. As a painting is unthinkable apart from the surface on which it is laid out, so all our experience is not merely intermingled with the threats to human existence, but is constituted by them.

It is what it is by its perilous nature. Therefore humanism does not offer another certainty for the certainty of the gospels, nor another security for the security in God, nor another ultimate goal for eternal salvation. It simply assumes the possibility of a significant life in trial and error, with no other guarantee than man's inextinguishable endeavour, and without any other-wordly purposes. Life in the humanist conception bears its ultimate goals in itself.

All humanist variegations represent an approach to reality, relying on natural and social resources, in that they do not assume a cosmic mind or purpose. They take human values as final. Moreover, in their modern form, they aim not only at interpreting man and the world in a human way, but also at providing a basis for human living that fully meets human needs in every day life. Modern humanism holds that the shaping of man's ends lies in his own hands. It opposes a widespread feeling of the futility of living in a secularized world. Man's self-determination in connectedness with others can both enrich personal existence and provide a directive for association with others. Notwithstanding the abyss of sorrow, guilt, disease and misery through which a man often must go, his commitment to human living can make human existence really worth while. But human living means living in community; human achievement depends on social culture. Conversely society is bound to furnish the conditions for the welfare of its members. Its progress is progress in freedom of choice, in that more people can do or renounce more things. And this freedom is naturally connected with justice as equity of choice. This equally applies to world society. Hence the humanist commitment to the cause of underdeveloped areas, world order and world peace. For mankind is not an addition of nations and races but a unity of men, implying a common responsibility of all men for all men.

Therefore a common attitude and a common commitment? Indeed, but they stem from common elements of conviction that define the humanist identity. Naturally everyone is free to call his conviction humanism or not. But common parlance requires clarity and it is no use to understand under the term humanism all kinds of conceptions that do not correspond with the humanist tradition. Nevertheless this humanist tradition itself is not an unambiguous datum. But perhaps the characteristic intermediate position of humanism offers a clue. It develops between established conceptions and their annihilation. It is directed towards maintaining really human values under employment of the newest modes of knowledge and thinking. It moves outside the traditional pattern of life, but it particularly opposes the destruction of what it considers to be the real human values. In this balance it purposefully accepts the perilous adventure of existence as an experiment which gives to an initially pointless world a meaning that is satisfying in itself.

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Man's only real concern, it seems, is to prove constantly to himself that he really is a human being and not just a cog in a machine; to prove it even at the price of his own suffering... You say nobody wants to take away my free will, they only want to arrange things so that my free will coincides freely with my best interests, with the laws of nature and with arithmetic. What sort of free will is that, when it is reduced to two times two equals four? Two times two will still be four without my willing it. Is that all free will is?

*Dostoevsky
Notes from Underground, 1864*