

Humanism as a Living Force

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The claim of Christianity that every civilization not based on Christian faith is bound to decay is not only highly contestable, but, if it were true, it would also make the outlook of our world even duller than it is already. For we must not forget the rather important fact that the adherents of Christianity comprise only one-third of the present world population. Those who do not believe in the supernatural truth of the Gospel, nor trustfully await the marvelous conversion of all atheists, Islamites, Jews, Buddhists, animists, and adherents of all other creeds, philosophies, and convictions can derive little reassurance from the assumption that Christianity alone can save mankind.

Moreover, it is characteristic of the period since the Industrial Revolution that theistic religion, even in the so-called Christian part of the world, is increasingly losing its authority. Notwithstanding its impressive development of spiritual and social power, it is obvious that the real grasp of the churches on human life in its cultural, political, and personal aspects is gradually declining or can be maintained only by humanizing the tidings of faith. Neither the resolute affirmation of religious truth, nor the consistent effort by the church to regain its grasp on the world, can stop the steady increase of unbelief.

Since unbelief is no longer the result of personal choice against tradition and public opinion but has become rather a tradition in itself, nihilism and routine menace the uprooted masses. Amidst the excesses of modern society, they are almost without moral defense against the social temptations of this period and left helpless before the disasters of personal life. In this respect it is not of much help to observe that there have always been individuals in every walk of life—even whole groups—that have acquired a satisfactory conviction about man and the world entirely apart from any reliance on supernatural religion, or that the religion of the masses has often before declined to indifference.

The importance of this problem imposes on all those who do not believe in the psychological possibility of supernatural religion inspiring

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the secular part of mankind the responsibility of creating a basis of life worthy of man and attainable for all. Such a basis, when developed, should enable us to stand firm in the struggle for the realization of a complete, undogmatic, creative philosophy capable of inspiring the daily existence of millions. At the same time, it should build a bridge between those who derive their inspiration from such a philosophy and the adherents of innumerable other creeds and convictions all over the world. They must arrive at a genuinely human philosophy, which deals with human matters in a way that appeals to everyone, regardless of individual theological position.

Humanism, liberal Humanism, is the natural name for such a philosophy. We say this notwithstanding the fact that historical Humanism at the time of the Renaissance had not often cut off relations with the church. And even today there is still a biblical Humanism; to a certain extent Catholicism and liberal Protestantism are both penetrated by a religious Humanism. Modern Humanism, however, may be looked upon as the most consistent realization of the historic traditions of spiritual autonomy, undogmatic thinking, and a genuinely humane inspiration.

But what then is the meaning of *liberal* Humanism? It is clear that it cannot be built on a mere theoretical deduction if it is to be a living force, a real philosophy of life. Moreover, it can be taken for granted that the nature of Humanism cannot be reduced to a definition without losing something of its total meaning in life, but yet it is possible to enumerate some of the indispensable points of departure for a Humanist conviction. Thus, it can be said that liberal Humanism is a philosophy of life and the world not based on a particular revelation; that it accepts as a fundamental principle a respect for man as the bearer of a sense of value that is not arbitrary; that it derives its special character from the conviction that man must be considered in his relation to a world of which he is a unique constituent.

A liberal Humanism of this kind is democratic in all its procedures of thought and action. It places full emphasis upon the fulfillment of human life within the immediate and present circumstances of earthly existence and upon human responsibilities in all matters pertaining to the solution of personal and social problems. It is not necessarily optimistic about the results of individual and collective human activities, and it has an open eye for the radical selfishness of man; but it is deeply convinced of man's vocation to make the most of his talents, notwith-

standing the negative potentialities in his nature. So it believes in human possibilities *as possibilities*.

Its center of gravity is not to be found in an anti-religious attitude; it is itself religious in a general sense, but in the creating of a really humane sphere of life. Of course, Humanism cannot always avoid conflict with theological religion in maintaining the truth of its convictions; its activities, however, are not primarily directed against religion, but against oppression of conscience and humanity from whatever source—be it clerical, be it political.

A liberal Humanist program can be condensed to one sentence: To appeal by word and deed to the sense of value and of responsibility which it believes to be essential for man. It will have its Sunday lectures, its courses of study, its broadcasts, its pamphlets and papers, its reports and resolutions, but particularly its practical applications, its cultural activities, its part in social work, its concern with the moral difficulties of men. It will find its organic forms in Humanist societies; it will develop its own way of living without dividing a nation by impenetrable walls, inclined as it is toward earnest cooperation; it will be a source of cultural and social renewal without defined political or creedal affiliations, as it carries its own message of a world safe for humanity.

Mankind is still young; and if it can succeed in postponing its suicide for a while, the time will come in the near future when this liberal Humanism will be a considerable power for religious noncreedal rehabilitation and renovation of spiritual and practical living. It will be a source of inspiration to every individual who cannot longer find his center of religious experience in other-worldly creeds. At the same time it will provide a basis of understanding for men of every creed, conviction, race, class, or nation. In our time we can observe—in the spiritual and practical activities of the British and American Ethical Unions, of the American and Dutch Humanist Associations, of the Vienna *Ethische Gemeinde*, as well as the efforts of many other groups and individuals—the first hesitating attempts to found such a world-wide philosophy.

What else is Fung-yu-lan's¹ object in trying to found a new Confucianism, non-theistic and based on genuine human philosophy? What else

¹Fung-yu-lan is a neo-Confucianist of importance. His aim is to reconcile Eastern and Western thinking with a volume entitled *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals* in 1926 and other books on the history and spirit of Chinese philosophy, two of which were published in 1947 and 1948.

is the Indonesian leader Sjahrir² seeking for when saying: "That is the core of the matter: We are after all children of our age and we have a conscience. Call it self-respect; call it consciousness of human values; call it whatever you like—it is testing oneself by one's inner hold, one's values, one's principles, one's prejudices, one's feelings, one's instincts." What else is Nehru aiming at by wording his conviction: "Religion as I saw it practised and accepted, even by thinking minds, whether it was Hinduism, or Islam, or Christianity, did not attract me. What the mysterious is I do not know. I do not call it God because God has come to mean much that I do not believe in."

The first thing to be done now is to establish Humanism, in theory and in practice, as a living force—nationally, by developing the timid attempts already being made; internationally, by calling a world congress as an effective demonstration (1) of the unity which underlies the Humanist groups that are to be found in several countries, and (2) of the awakened sense of responsibility of Humanists throughout the world in relation to human problems. Nobody knows what will be the outcome of such an effort, but it may very well mark the beginning of a new era.

²Sulan Sjahrir is a promising Indonesian leader. Born in 1910, he is sympathetic to labor and was prime minister of the first Indonesian government during 1945 to 1947. Characterized as a "Nehru type," Sjahrir wrote (in Dutch) *Indonesia Meditations* in 1945.

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