

CHAPTER I

Introductory address.

by J. P. van Praag

Impressed with the significant fact that here and now more than two hundred people from all over the world have met to discuss their views on humanism and ethical culture on an international level, as chairman of the organizing committee I extend a hearty welcome to all of you. You will all regret, as I do, the fact that our well-known president, Mr. Julian Huxley, because of the state of his health, will not be able to exercise the active chairmanship of our meetings, which was his and our definite intention. Until the last moment the organizing Committee indulged in the hope that Mr. Huxley could be here during this congress, but as this turned out not to be reasonable, the chair will be taken by members of the organizing committee. Nevertheless I'm glad that I can inform you that Mr. Huxley this night will address the public opening session as our president.

You will allow me to express on this occasion the feelings of gratitude of the Dutch Humanist Association that it was deemed worthy by the sponsoring organizations to receive the first congress on humanism and ethical culture in this little country. We do hope that the arrangements we have made will assure all the comfort by means of which the congress will be enabled to devote itself to its exigent duties. We will feel thankful if "Amsterdam" in future will mean something to you, if it will represent a spirit. This brings us to the issue at stake: The aims and spirit of the First Congress on Humanism and Ethical Culture. What was aimed at by the organizations who joined in calling this congress? You may have read in the second announcement of this international meeting: The aim of the congress is to bring together those who share the view that, especially in connection with the formidable problems and appalling dangers of the present world-situation, human justice, freedom, solidarity and development are difficult possibilities, which call for planned and sustained effort. The Congress should be a first step on the way to establishing the means of a continuous collaboration between thinkers and workers who share the general point of view of humanism and ethical culture in order to develop an instructed common purpose.

So two aims are formulated: first to draft a conception of humanism on an international level, and second to establish permanent relations between humanist and ethical groups all over the world. I think it will be possible to agree during this congress to the foundation of an international association as an instrument of international activity and I hope we shall succeed in drafting a conception of it in which breadth of outlook and precision of purpose are combined. Such an attempt can be undertaken if we are aware of the historic importance of the moment and are able to realize the purpose-fulness and understanding that are required.

Founding a new international organization when there exists the World Union of Free-Thinkers does not mean an act of enmity. There are various personal relations between the Wuft and us but the sponsoring organizations of this Congress felt that it is time to embody a new impulse and a new outlook in a new organization. If we are convinced of the necessity to shape humanism and ethical culture as a positive and constructive philosophy of life, we cannot do without an international institution that answers this conviction.

Concerning the other aim of our congress to develop an instructed common purpose, it will be necessary first to consider fundamentally the position of humanism and ethical culture in our time. Especially the subjects of to-morrow, Saturday and Monday, that is 'The meaning of science and democracy for human progress', 'The humanization of man in society' and 'The programme of humanism and ethical culture', will afford every opportunity for a thorough exchange of thoughts and visions. As this congress was planned as a working-congress rather than a demonstration of eloquence, the organizing committee suggests that papers will not be read again, but after a short review by an appointed speaker, will be thoroughly discussed in the sections. Concise summaries of these discussions will be reported to the plenary sessions. In this way we hope to achieve a real interchange of thought between the attenders of this congress.

I suppose it will require much goodwill and patience to come to a close understanding between people of such different countries, languages, cultures and traditions as we are. But it is worth while trying it. For we know that we are prompted by a common impulse and that — as I may say perhaps without exaggerating — the eyes of the world are fixed on our proceedings. Therefore let's

stick to each other as a small but determined forefront of mankind. Let's forget for a while contróversies we brought with us from home, let's try to see through the traditional meaning of words and hit the thing meant, let's open our eyes, ears and hearts to the needs, longings and impulses of each other. It's up to us to transcend all sectarian interests and to evoke a common loyalty for the sake of the humanism that we come together to shape here for the first time at an international level.

There is one more thing I wish to draw your attention to. According to my view it would not be wise to expect this congress to intervene in practical world-problems. There is a Dutch proverb which says. One must first have a hand before making a fist. Our first task is to give international humanism hands now. It is far from me to deny that humanism and ethical culture shall draft their own conceptions of the world situation, but before expecting efficient intervention in world affairs by a humanist movement, we must make it a force — be it a spiritual force — that is to be reckoned with. So our first duty is to develop our national movements and to gather the scattered sparks of humanism all over the world. For now is the time to make our movement a sounding-board of all humanist and ethical thought and action, a source of creative individual and social living.

Everything really worth while in our life will perish unless we are able to inspire mankind with the fundamental principles that have built our civilization. Are we prepared to meet this challenge? And if so, will we succeeded? No one can tell, but for our part we cannot but try to make humanism a strong impulse, a creative energy, a living force. Against the horrors of famine, diseases, concentration camps and H-bombs, for us there's no way out but to venture on with the inspiring conviction of men pledged to make the world safe for humanity. May this conviction not as an eloquent phrase but as ardent desire of our hearts stamp the considerations of this congress.

Herewith, I declare the First Congress on Humanism and Ethical Culture opened.