

# PUBLIC MEETING

## OPENING ADDRESS

by J. P. van Praag

I feel really glad that I may welcome you at this Public Meeting of the 2nd Congress of the IHEU. „Glad” because your presence demonstrates that what concerns the humanist and ethical movement, is of real public interest. „Glad” also, because your interest provides the opportunity to state once more publicly the aims and character of our movement. We feel honoured, moreover, that such outstanding persons as are announced in the program of this meeting are willing to have connected their names with the humanist and ethical organizations to which they are indeed fully committed.

So I may introduce to you (in alphabetical order) Mr. Bronowski, director of Research of the National Coal Board in this country. Mr. Bronowski as a well known scientist and publicist must be considered as highly qualified to address this meeting on “Science and Responsibility”. I don’t think there is much need to explain why Mr. Muller was invited to give his views on “Radioactive fall-out in relation to human progress”. I daresay Mr. Muller as American geneticist and Nobel prize winner obtained world wide fame by his serious appeal to human conscience to consider the menace of radioactive fall-out caused by the detonation of atom hydrogen bombs. And last not least I may announce Mr. Strachey, M .P. who will submit to us his view on the subject of “Power politics and humanist solidarity.” We feel grateful that all of you are willing to contribute to the success of this meeting.

This brief survey, may indicate already the great concern that we attach to the practical problems of human life. And indeed humanism and ethical culture are not issues of mere theoretical interest. It is their sincere aim to provide a basis for ordinary men and women to solve the problems they are confronted with in daily practice. Many of us cannot feel any longer satisfied by the answer of traditional creeds. But this does not mean at all that they would not be guided by fundamental convictions about man’s life, nor that they would not be inspired by essential beliefs on human destiny and responsibility.

Our union stands for many more in the modern world than are numbered in its member organizations, when it refers to these convictions and beliefs, and seeks to give effect to these motives. For this purpose and without hostility to the liberty of all convictions, it would rally all those who stand alone because they stand, on grounds of belief, outside the fellowship of the historical faiths, and yet long for a significant existence. Modern ethical humanism represents a world-wide movement which appeals to a world that for the greater part is unconscious of the Christian impact. It is or should be a firm effort to combine the promethean spirit of the West and the religious experience of the East. Don’t confuse this please with Western self-sufficiency, nor with Eastern superstition. I speak of the essential contribution of both to the common value of really autonomous humanity.

There is going to be a gigantic meeting of East and West of which only few will have a faint idea. If we don't care it might lead to a catastrophic crash of tradition without offering an opportunity to safeguard the true values embodied therein. It is our responsibility as well to elaborate a humanist and ethical view of life, taking together the valuable contributions gathered through ages of human endeavour and experience everywhere in the world, and inspiring human beings in their struggle for a life worthy of man, even in this period of unheard perils and unparalleled resources, both material and moral.

In this complicated, ever changing, dynamic world, in which traditional patterns of life can less and less govern man's behaviour, it is fully worth while to focus once more his attention on experiences and beliefs by which he really lives. It is exactly this that humanism and ethical culture aim at. We readily speak of philosophical background, scientific method and democratic standards — and indeed these are important aspects in the sphere of reflection. But the essence of ethical humanism is to awaken the inner forces in man that may enable him to deal independently with the problems of life in an ethical, reasonable and democratic spirit. This point of departure precedes any doctrine or theory. It appeals to every man in his human condition.

The human condition. The time has gone when this condition was self-evidently understood in an optimistic way. We have learned too much about evil chances in human nature and social relations. And we learned it harshly. And we shall not forget. Moreover we experienced that it is really difficult to grasp the significance of existence in a world that is torn up, threatened and chaotic. And in our personal lives: Who doesn't know disappointment, doubt and loneliness; who never asked: Why exactly? perceiving that life seemed to slip like sand through his fingers. Against this it is not enough to be convinced of formerly unknown possibilities of technical, social and cultural development. I don't deny these possibilities, but they will be realized only by human endeavour. Nor do I doubt that courageous effort can provide promising perspectives, but this effort will be possible only by durable inspiration.

So it is not only desirable but really an indispensable condition for a significant future of mankind that we succeed renewing human inspiration, in appealing to man's unique possibilities. I remember I once saw a play of Joan of Arc. Not the well known St. Joan by Shaw, but a play by Maxwell Anderson. The climax of the play was what will be the climax of every play about Joan of Arc because it is the climax of her life, when she appears before the court. There she is, the simple peasant maid who followed the inspiration of her heart, now summoned to defend herself before the highest secular and clerical authorities. I quote by heart: „In all the world" she says „there is for nobody any authority but his own soul".

„Then you choose death" says the inquisitor.

And Joan answers: „And what if I offer my life for this choice? I know this. Every man offers his life for what he believes. Every woman offers her life for what she believes. One life is all we have and we live it as we think we should and then it is over. But denying what you are and living without belief, this is more terrible than dying, worse than dying young."

Well, that's all, I think: living with belief without denying what you

are. And it is the aim of our movement to further this way of living. How can it be done? It is our task to clarify man's condition by word of mouth and published writing; to inspire social and cultural reform by awakening the spirit of creative responsibility; and to develop patterns of humanistic and ethical life within and around the institutions and societies of our movement. This means that the humanist and ethical movement apart from its theoretical interest is really practical in its aims. It should provide a psychological basis for acceptable human relations, for responsible political social and cultural activity, and for a frank approach to the problems of our world and life.

Above all it is our task to help man to become profoundly human. Helping people to help themselves, that is. For this is the only condition by which man can make use of his faculties of devotion, morality and reason. Therefore our movement lays strong emphasis on practical solidarity, because it provides the situation in which man can develop his capacities. Hence our efforts in the field of education and common experience, in the field of cooperation and community-building, in the field of spiritual and social care, of marriage guidance and counselling of every kind. Ethical humanism is concerned, rather with men than with mankind, in their daily questions, problems, troubles and needs.

Will all this be of any use? Will it be of some help against the uncertainty, the fear, the distrust, the hatred of our world? Will it protect us against the threat of our time; against poverty, enmity, war; against the atom bomb? I don't know; nobody knows. But I know this: if there is anything that makes our lives really worth while and that gives us a chance for the future, it is to refuse to deny the essence of our humanity and so to keep going the creative forces of mankind. Life has always gone along the brink of the precipice, but if it still goes on, it is because there have always been men and women that persistently kept up the struggle for its deployment.

May I remind you of an old anecdote? It is about that man who newly became rich. He visited a noble lord and admired his dwellings and their fitting up. Nevertheless he didn't fail to suggest that his own resources enabled him to live under much the same circumstances. Yet there was one thing he really was jealous about and so he said: „My lord, this is really a thing I can't fully understand. How did you manage to acquire that beautiful green lawn before your house? I should be very happy if I could lay out such a lawn at home. Would that be possible?“. Said the Lord: „Of course it is possible. Everyone can manage it, if he has the ground and the means. And I shall tell you how easy it is: Sow the grass, and repeat it three times a year. Mow it regularly: at least every week. And keep it on..... three hundred years!“

If three ages are required to bring about a good lawn, why do we then assume that we can accomplish real humanity within three years or even within one man's life time? Is then a man less than a blade of grass? Is mankind less than a lawn? If it is not, then keep alive the inspiration of humanity in your life, in our movement, in mankind. Really it is not worth while to start at all, to make such sacrifices of means and personal effort, if we are not convinced that our enterprise is, rather than an intellectual game, the answer to the challenge of our time, the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind.

The only thing required is belief. Not a transcendental faith, but belief

in our own destiny. I cannot inculcate it on you. The only thing I can do is to try and remind you of what you expected and demanded from life when once you were a young man or woman. Of course we grew older and gained in experience and — may be — wisdom. And we are inclined to say to young people: „Wait and see how you will judge when you are twenty years older“. Is it really a merit to be born earlier? I would not deny the importance of experience, but I dare say that it is quite useless and worthless if we don't succeed in preserving apart from the wisdom of our age the belief of our youth.

That belief of which Jean d'Arc said: „Every man offers his life for what he believes. Every woman offers her life for what she believes. One life is all we have and we live it as we think we should and than it is over. But denying what you are and living without belief, this is more terrible than dying, more than dying young...“