

The voice of humanism

I believe that the humanist voice has a function of its own which cannot be fulfilled in any other way. Political broadcasts, for instance, cannot fulfil this function. Politics too are concerned with our place and duty in the world of today; politics too must consider the desires of the individual and his future. But the concept "politics" already implies that one has ideas on the significance of being human. In the political party people of different faiths work together. They have to get their inspiration to do this from elsewhere. They may get it in humanist circles. There one meets people of divergent political views. But they have in common that they do not stop asking themselves what people of today and tomorrow need. Again and again they consider the driving-force of their political choice, even if it does not lead to a common point of view.

Does the same not hold good for the churches? It does, but the fact is that the humanist takes a stand which is different from the one of the religious man. Much is changing in the church. The God-is-dead theology gives religion a humanist flavour. But the humanist fails to see what characteristic there remains in religion. What he does understand is that the majority of the adherents of the churches have starting-points which are quite different from his own. And above all, that in practice he has to fight for every inch of ground in order to perform his task well. In spite of all recognition little has changed in that respect. The battle has only moved from the discussion on principles to the practical implementation. Anyway, it has been proved that non-religious people want an environment which is completely different from that of the church. The humanist endeavours to create such an environment.

He lives in a society in which traditional authority has lost its significance; in which taboos of yore no longer count; in which old rules of life no longer apply. Ours is also a dynamic world, a world of prosperity and information, but at the same time a world which confuses and oppresses many people with its risks of rigidity, threat of war and chaos. This too challenges the humanist to let his voice be heard.

The voice of the unchurched is no longer timid and shy like often in former days. On radio and television, in magazine and demonstration the religious faith plays often only a small part, also for people who still belong to a church. A critical view point and a break-through of the old forms are the order of the day. As to that, I think, a humanist can hardly surpass others. But here too he makes himself heard in his own way. He supports this criticism and this break-through, but at the same time he is looking for forms of life through which the individual is respected and the interdependence of people is expressed. He feels the discomfort and dissatisfaction that fill the mind of many a man; the criticism and satire with which stale forms and ideas are shown up appeal to him; he thinks he understands something of what drives provoes and hippies. He feels solidarity for those who are disquieted, but this solidarity forces him to make his disquietude tangible in structures in which more sincere humaneness is possible. For it is obvious that in a world in revolution more

sincerety, more freedom and more solidarity are only possible through new forms of society.

If a humanist has a task here, it is, I think, working towards the climate necessary for the realization of all this. Not acting the part of a political party, but setting free in the individual the forces to perform this task. That is what he has in view with his radio and television broadcasts, with his publications, meetings, conferences and practical activities. He must be aware of the fact that he can only do it, if he knows how to translate his conviction into practical life-situations. Only by understanding in some degree our own place in life can we mean something in the whole setting. What do we do with sexuality, marriage, education? How do we feel about labour, society, freedom and authority?

A humanist has not cut and dried solutions. The characteristic of the humanist is that he knows that he has to live with uncertainties, at the same being open to all that modern thinking, knowledge and experience moot. He has in mind the freedom of every human being; a freedom which means that he will have to choose in order to make something of life. But in the long run it becomes apparent that man only makes something of his life when he links it with the lives of others. That is in my opinion the choice of a humanist. He chooses — in spite of everything — the life with others. To his thinking this makes life worth while and this is the criterion of his decisions. His views on personal development and society, on freedom and restraint, on equality and justice are conditioned by it. He appeals to everybody to be human, also and just under the circumstances of today, and to account for his decisions. By that he does not necessarily mean an intellectual awakening or a theoretical justification, but a motivated choice in daily life.

What it means to be a humanist must not be shown by one big decision — big decisions are of rare occurrence in a person's life —, but by a series of everyday matters. Just show me what someone is like in his marriage or in the upbringing of others; how he decides his attitude as elder towards the younger and vice versa; what his attitude is as employer or as employee, as person in authority or as ordinary citizen; how he acts in his work and in his spare time, in societies and in political parties. The humanist is not a man without faults! Of course not and fortunately not, for I think it would make him an exasperating person. But one may expect that he combines self-consciousness with openness for the other in his being different, and singleness of intention with a feeling of solidarity. Through these qualities one contributes to a climate in which genuineness and originality can be active and thereby to the condition for more satisfying human relations.

Excerpts from a wireless lecture by Prof. Dr. J. P. van Praag