

On Humanism

There is no need to introduce J. P. van Praag to our readers. He is one of the founding fathers and the first chairman of the IHEU.

At the request of the editors of *Humanist*, the Journal of the Dutch Humanist League, he will write a number of articles on humanism. We are grateful to have obtained permission from the writer and the editors to publish translations of his article. There is in our opinion no doubt that our readers will benefit from this.

The Editors

by J. P. van Praag, former chairman IHEU

The term 'humanism' has gained considerable currency: lots of publications on humanism are being brought out, especially in the United States; there are books on Zambian humanism, on Korean humanism, on Judaistic humanism; and in all sorts of studies the world over humanism is referred to as a basis or an aim. However, the concept 'humanism' does not turn out to have exactly the same meaning everywhere. In fact, even within the humanist movement in the more restricted sense (e.g. in organizations) the term is often found to be insufficiently clear. That is why some people think it is too vague; others, on the contrary, are afraid of specifying it too precisely and thus possibly turning it into a dogma. The question now is whether it is possible to define 'humanism' without reducing it to an unassailable doctrine.

What is humanism?

To begin with, we must realize that humanism is a way of being which in itself is not of a theoretical nature. One may be a humanist without any theory. But people tend to be conscious of their actions and then the humanist way of being soon develops into a certain outlook on life.

Such an outlook is not identical with a philosophy; humanists may be adherents of all sorts of philosophies or of none at all. One cannot simply call it a 'view of life', because humanism is something other than just viewing, observing. The terms 'attitude to life' or 'life stance' are not satisfactory either, because on certain issues, for example in politics, Christians and humanists are known to adopt the same attitude.

Perhaps humanism as a conscious conception of existence might best be called a *moral conviction*. Some people are alarmed by this term since it connotes dogmatism to them; that, however, depends on the substance of a conviction. The humanist conviction is quite undogmatic and always open to dispute, but for humanists it is motivating and stimulating, and not just an inconsequential mental game.

As a rule the humanist moral conviction is unreligious. In this respect one may safely say that humanists are atheists: they do not think in terms of belief in a personal god nor do they believe in the particular significance of the life of Christ. Traditional freethinkers are mistaken when they state that there is a great difference between them and humanists on that score. It is just that humanists are not as certain as freethinkers of the immutability of their common point of view. In interpreting reality humanists proceed from human capacities, but they are able to understand that one may also proceed from a given — divine — reality presenting itself to people. The latter view is definitely not the generally accepted humanist conviction, but it is not easily refutable unless on the very basis of humanist assumptions!

Attitude of mind

Some people find it rather difficult to realize that all, religious and non-religious, moral convictions have a basis which precedes all consciousness of life and the world. This basis or attitude of mind determines the kind of questions we ask and the kind of answers we give. This attitude of mind sifts our experiences so that some acquire more significance than others, and thus a certain order is created.

Humanists will not easily accept the notion that such an attitude of mind is innate in man: individual aptitudes, education, background and cultural patterns, and particularly one's experiences are decisive elements in the shaping of an attitude of mind. Once it is formed it becomes part of one's existence, something one is hardly aware of and so it is very difficult not to be influenced by it. One does not *have* an attitude of mind, one *is* one's attitude of mind.

That is why discussions about moral convictions are usually so depressing: experiences and reflections which are of particular significance for one person, are viewed quite differently and thus found unconvincing by somebody else. The best one may hope to achieve is a certain appreciation of and mutual respect for each other's assumptions. But then everybody concerned should at least have some awareness of his or her own assumptions, otherwise they cannot be a subject of discussion. Then, in spite of all differences in attitudes of mind, some assumptions may prove to be similar after all, so that understanding and even practical co-operation may follow.

In fact, it is of importance to all people to take stock of their assumptions, because these can help them to achieve coherence in their decisions and thereby give

meaning to their lives. And — as we shall see later on — this is one of the most important aspects of human life. Maybe the most significant contribution of humanism is that it is able to offer a basis for making human existence meaningful.

Humanist assumptions

First of all we must try to define the assumptions arising from a humanist attitude of mind. This may be done by simply ascertaining what one considers to be one's own assumptions. Another method is to examine what lies behind the statements about life and the world, man and society which are made regularly by humanists all over the world. What most humanists think and say is not necessarily true, but it does provide a characteristic picture of what humanism represents.

Meanwhile it must have become evident that we will never arrive at a scientifically refutable theory. Humanism is not a theory. It is a way of living which may be reflected in a moral conviction. To people with a different attitude of mind such a conviction has little convincing power, but this in no way affects the inner certainty of those who have embraced that conviction. It enables them to respond to the challenges of the world, to courageously engage in the adventure of living, and to give meaning to their lives themselves.

What can we say about the humanist attitude of mind? Taken by itself: not very much for the very reason that it precedes all awareness. But we may get to know this attitude by examining the assumptions resulting from it. What do humanists throughout the world think and say about such subjects as justice and survival, armament and development co-operation, or about sexuality and marriage, education and ethics? In what basic views do these thoughts and opinions have their roots? These views or assumptions may be formulated as postulates about man and the world.

View of man

Humanists believe that people are characterized by naturalness, relatedness, equality, freedom and rationality. Of course they realize that the reverse might be argued as well: people are created, selfish, unequal, not free and unreasonable. Which exactly is true cannot be deducted from reality. The qualities humanists would call negative may occur more often in practice than the positive ones. But humanists believe that those positive qualities are characteristic of real humanity, a belief which proceeds from their attitude of mind and which does not pretend to be an objective analysis of humanity but a standpoint on real humanity.

Naturalness implies that people spring from nature and are part of it, possessing a consciousness which is indissolubly bound to their bodies. That is why culture is a product of human nature as well.

People emerge collectively from nature, only together they can become human beings — which is what is meant by *relatedness*. That does not imply that human

society is idyllic, far from it! But it means that real humanity can only be achieved when we realize that we depend on each other.

This interdependence is connected with the postulate of *equality*, which should, of course, not be interpreted as people all being the same, something humanists do not advocate. It means that people are recognizable as people, they belong to the same species and therefore should have the same rights and duties.

A similar thing goes for *freedom*: people are not free in many respects. But whatever one may think of whether freedom is possible or not, it is an undeniable fact that people have to make choices all the time. The pattern of their lives is not determined in the same manner as that of most animals. They themselves — in conjunction with others — have to shape their own lives. It is not a question of a theoretical free will, but of a concrete, inevitable freedom of choice.

Finally, all this is connected with *rationality*, which again does not mean that people are always supposed to be perfectly reasonable. It involves a readiness to answer rationally for one's opinions and deeds, which leads to better understanding.

Jointly these postulates provide a humanist view of man which is neither so vague or so impenetrable that it has no relevance for anybody.

View of the world

A set of postulates to define the humanist view of the world may be drawn up as well. Humanists assume that the world is experienceable, existent, complete, accidental and dynamic. These assumptions too need some elucidation.

Man perceives the world by means of his senses and his consciousness, and the most basic form of perception is that of *experience*. In experiencing the ego as it were merges with the world, something which might be called a — non-denominational — religious experience. Next, people are able to observe, discriminate and summarize: that is the experiential form of reflection. Experience and reflection need and supplement each other mutually, something important to keep in mind otherwise humanism may become sterile. Once again: humanism is not a theory but a manner of experiencing capable of being put into words through reflection.

Experience and reflection refer to a really *existent* world, a world which is not regarded as some chimerical notion or an illusion as in some philosophical schools.

Man and the world are indissoluble in their existence. And that world is *complete*, which means that people have to manage with that world without having recourse to extraneous, super-natural powers or forces.

Of course, man is able to make more and more discoveries in the world and to widen his knowledge, but his concern is only with the experience of and the reflection on

this, *accidental*, world. Accidental, because we do not know why or for what the world exists. Nor can we find any meaning in a world which reveals absolutely no sense of purpose.

We ourselves will have to give meaning to our lives in this perpetually developing, *dynamic* world which may be the product of the big bang and will perhaps revert to a concentration of energy some time.

This characterization of a humanist view of man and the world should not be taken as an unassailable doctrine. It just expresses what most humanists say they accept as the basis of their conviction, irrespective of the fact that each of them may lay a different emphasis on the various postulates. Also it may be difficult for some to accept each postulate completely. Yet, all ten provide a rather clear picture of what humanists think. They constitute the common denominator of the numerous nuances of humanism: social, political, cultural and particularly as regards the shaping of one's personal life.

Therein lies the openness, the large-mindedness of humanism: it is really something, not just anything people may wish to make out of it, and it does not hamper creativity either. On the contrary, it appeals to everybody continually to shape his own existence.

To be continued