

An address, held by the IHEU chairman at the RPA-European Summer Conference in Cambridge (August 1972).

Tasks for humanists! It goes without saying that one of these tasks is to promote mutual understanding. Humanists can further exchange of concepts, publications and approaches among the humanist movements. They also can try and spread knowledge of the specific problems and life-style in the various countries. Last but not least they may strive at a common effort to establish an open, democratic and just world society. The latter includes a common democratic control of institutions and economic powers. It requires the subordination of nationalism and the integration in a world system, also to the benefit of developing countries. It moreover requires an ingenious approach in order to further peace and equity in the world. But all this is not so much a matter of techniques and methods as of changes in public opinion. And humanists can contribute to it by their impact upon public morality.

Their impact! But does this impact really exist? And if so, to what degree and in which field? In the modern development towards secularization humanists have played their part. They were the promoters of enlightenment and of a secular morality. They contributed quite a bit to the liberation of the human mind and human behaviour. Particularly the Rationalist Press Association may be mentioned with praise. However, immediately after World War II it was clear that the changing of mind is not only a matter of enlightenment and understanding, but as much of personal experience and interhuman relations. Hence the development of counselling practices in the context of social service. And even these — as it became clear during the sixties — could not really function very well without any connexion with social action. So in the late sixties social action became the issue, particularly with the British Humanist Association, the Dutch Humanist League and the Belgian Humanist League. Humanists campaigned for revision of marriage and divorce laws, for women's liberation, for acknowledgement of homosexuality, for a realistic approach to the drug problem, etc. Already before though, they made a stand for population control, abolition of nuclear weapons, social equity and conservation of the environment, to mention only a few main topics.

It is an impressive list. But somehow or other it did not quite work out as it should have done. Sometimes it looks as if the impact of the humanist movement is loosing strength, while the humanist idea is spreading more and more, and humanism seems to become a key word in all progressive thinking, even within theology. At the same time the movement is continuously faced with financial catastrophes; not only on account of the continuing inflation but also because of the decrease of membership. And what is still worse, this entails more often than not the aging of the organizations. This again causes the inclination to stick to traditional patterns, every now and then alternated by ambitious statements. But what is the use of ambitious statements, if they fail to really hit the public? If they lack depth of thought or originality, they are not even harmless. In that case they devalue their case and give the movement a misplaced feeling of achievement.

Now let us review how far we have come till now. We started by considering new tasks for humanists. Some of them, namely in the sphere of information, are feasible for the movement as it is. Others, however, concerning the establishment of a democratic and just society seem to lie beyond our reach. They cannot be achieved by mere declarations, but require a change of public spirit. And this is not only a matter of enlightenment. I hope that nobody will misunderstand me: Rationalism, well understood, is the core of humanist thinking and acting, but in order to clear the way for rationalism other layers of the personality must be integrated into a coherent pattern.

Here we touch upon a topical problem of the humanist movement. In my opinion it is a problem of survival of the humanist movement as a living force in present circumstances.

Reflection or action?

In the movement nowadays much uncertainty prevails as to the nature and appearance of humanist activities: On the one hand there is the call for action, on the other hand a renewed appeal for reflection. It often looks as if these two currents are irreconcilable and sometimes this is really the case. Many humanists are of the opinion that in this time of unexpected menaces only direct action is useful. They have an aversion to humanist theorizing which they consider a luxury. In this respect they are as alike as two peas, compared with those progressive christians who also only just succeeded in saving their social action from the wreck of traditional faith. But other humanists on the other hand emphasize principal reflection: account of thought and action, deepening of conceptions, respect for others and reasonable consultation. The activists often aim at a broad movement, the theorists at a small elite.

Nowadays radical social actions are the order of the day. These actions are motivated by unacceptable experiences in present society. They are justified — often unconsciously — by critical sociology. They are directed towards the change of conceptions, behaviour, situations and structures, and sometimes towards a radical revolution of the social order. Our society has come to a deadlock — so they think — and this leads them to a sometimes spasmodic effort to revalue all values. Mostly they start from an optimistic view of man. If we can abolish the frustrating situations in which he lives, we may expect that everything will be all right. Self-conceit, selfishness, lust for power, jealousy won't play an important part any more. Power, coercion and surely violence will be superfluous. A very old dream . . .

That does not alter the fact that we really live in a society that produces disturbing behaviour and then rejects it; also a society that alienates man from the community, the others and himself; and afterwards society is astonished at the conflicts that result from it. Therefore a humanist often will feel sympathy for critical actions and he will feel the urge to support them. This is in line with the humanist tradition. Humanism of old is directed towards the defence of human dignity and humanization of society. In the present period this means that humanists cannot remain indifferent to various critical actions. So there is a distinct inclination everywhere in the movement to identify humanist activities with critical social functions.

However, the ideologists — the humanists who stress reflection — oppose this tendency. They emphasize the need for a reasonable account of human behaviour. They point at individual problems that everybody must solve here and now, even if he cannot change the circumstances. They consider it an important challenge to humanists to further critical thought, respect for others and willingness for consultation. Some of them stress the human need for a religious dimension. Religion then is not conceived as some form of creed, but as the acknowledgement of the inscrutability of existence and the notion that man can somehow experience all-embracing reality and draw power from it.

The obvious objection of the activists is: improve yourself, start with the world. What is the good of rationality and reflection, if obscure power policy causes death and destruction; if two thirds of humanity perish from famine and disease; if also around us prejudice, narrow-mindedness, injustice and repressive tolerance make life unbearable?

What is the use of helping one man if circumstances impede his humanity and that of thousands of other men? We have had enough and to spare of theory, now it is the change of society that matters. We have sufficiently discussed our assumptions, for that matter: what has been the use of it? Is it not clear what should be done? This is the end of the policy of the parish pump and the beginning of the shaping of a humane world.

Harmony and conflict

Am I wrong if I state that this is a topical discussion in our movement? Or must I assume that there are parts of the movement that still indulge in the ecstasy of proving that morality without God is possible and even better; or that traditional faith tends to corrupt man (as by the way many other doctrines do)? Do we realize that both points are also made within the churches, particularly by modern theologians? And, what is more important, that they are engaged in the same discussion as we are or should be? They too have to consider the relation between action and contemplation. And we must be careful not to get in the rear-guard of progressive developments.

As to me I doubt if there is really such a complete contrast between humanistic thought and action. I never believed that, and I have always stressed their coherence, be it in each period according to the demands of the time. Fertile thought inspires deeds; fertile action requires thoughtfulness. Moreover, if humanist reflection is not needed for practice, it is not clear why there should be a humanist movement at all. In that case one should envisage the consequences and liquidate the organization. If humanist associations should want to be nothing more but action groups, they would indulge in sectarianism. One cannot understand that a humanist organization would be needed to that end. It would not only be superfluous, but also ineffective. For special action groups meet their task much better than humanist organizations ever could.

But a humanist organization has meaning, precisely from the point of view of action. It can be a means to give more permanent contents to activities and to further more coherence in various actions. To that end an appeal can be made to the mutual understanding and the continual cooperation that exist in a fixed setting. But such a setting demand a certain degree of similarity of opinions. It is inevitable to consider these opinions, however regrettable some may think this. Action groups perform a part-task and after some time easily disperse. Naturally also a humanist organization is concerned with part-tasks, but their coherence consists of their consciousness of the meaning of human existence in society. This places individual and community in a humanistic framework. And so humanists can contribute something specific to the development of both. In that way a humanist view can furnish the impulse and the standard of humanist relations with individuals and groups.

These considerations are by no means merely academic. They influence the performance of humanist activities. We are living in a world of deception, violence, inhumanity, but also in a world in which emancipation, human deployment and resistance to the consumptive society and the pollution of environment increase hand over hand. This often leads to stubborn confrontations and conflicts. It is sometimes said that the harmony model is replaced by the conflict model. But what does that mean? One must admit that in the harmony model there is a leaning to obscuring conflicts by means of formulas that solve nothing. Naturally the conflicts survive beneath the surface and exercise a destructive effect. This may be the result of the so-called harmony model. But what about the conflict model? Does it mean that conflicts must be

fought out till the bitter end? It is often conceived in that way. But is it a useful conception?

Surely conflicts should not be obscured. But Galtung who is often looked upon as the father of the conflict model, definitely did not mean that conflicts should be unrestrictedly fought out. This is clear if one considers that he developed his conceptions in relation to the conflicts of the world powers. What he aims at is conflict control. This means that the conflict does not wind up with the destruction of both parties involved. The same applies to a society in which conflicts occur. And that could easily happen. Our structures are that intricate, that only little is needed to disturb them so thoroughly that society completely perishes. An agrarian society can stand quite a bit and quickly recover. But disturbance of our technological society easily carries catastrophic results. It means obviously the end of everything that is still acceptable in human relations, and because this is unbearable, it will lead to dictatorship in the end.

Man and society

Perhaps there are situations in which violence can only be met by violence. But as long as that is not irrevocably the case, and even then, conflict-control matters a great deal. Humanists can play an important part on that level, provided that they can indeed contribute something specific; and something specific can only consist of their view on man and society. If a humanist association means anything, than is should not be a diluted action group, but a purposeful movement, based on humanist conceptions. Here also lies the firm connection between idea and action, which is indispensable for a humanist movement. The idea must go to the root, before action can rise from it. But which ideas go to the root?

There are various approaches to the present problems. But in a humanist conception it is obvious to start with man. In a radically changing society he is often involved in an inner crisis. Traditional patterns don't any longer apply to the situation; everything seems possible and everything also seems to embody dangers. The whole of humanity is menaced by destruction. Almost nobody finds a foothold. Many people are involved in an inner chaos. Who am I; what should I do? Man obtains identity in relation to society. In some periods, like ours, it can be difficult to derive from it a direction for one's proper existence. Then appears easily alienation from society, the others and oneself. This results in a weak self-awareness. And this influences the mental and psychic health of men. In this case there is also a weak other-directedness. This appears in the shape of a great dependence on the group in which one lives. Hence a quick alteration of fashions and utterances together with a remarkable conformity within the group. On the other hand self-confidence often agrees with self-confident other-directedness; one understands the other one, and may mean something for him without denying oneself. Self-confidence and real partnership provide conditions for a healthy development. But a lack of self-awareness entails that too much energy is devoted to a spasmodic effort yet to be someone. It blocks real solidarity. Authoritarian people don't have a surplus of self-confidence but a shortage of it. To the degree they feel more threatened they behave more authoritatively. This applies both to traditionalists and to renovators. So confrontation often sharpens a conflict until a solution becomes impossible.

All this largely affects the nature and practice of social activities. The crisis of one's identity leads to childish patterns of behaviour, such as phantasies of omnipotence. One thinks oneself capable of stopping time or changing the world at once. Anti-

authoritarian attitudes easily turn out to be authoritarian themselves. On the other hand lack of self-consciousness can with authoritarian people easily lead either to abuse of everything novel, or precisely to blind worship of youth e.g. But on the basis of a notion concerning the meaning of one's existence, the traditionalist can be a valuable counterpart of the renewer, while the renewer can usefully act upon tradition. Therefore it is the task of humanists to further in all activities the consciousness of identity.

However identity cannot replace power. And power is required for changing alienating structures; be it only united moral power. But also material power demands a moral basis to become really effective and only selfconscious people can effectively change alienating structures. Self-consciousness however depends on the notion of the meaning and the coherence of one's decisions. From that coherence precisely originates the consciousness of identity within continuous change. The promotion of this process is no luxury, but an indispensable condition for useful change of structures and real mental health. It requires as much reflection as action. Both of them are directed towards mental maturity and social renewal. Humanist ideas function in this context. They are no flags to be used to hit others on the head, but tokens of a common thinking and acting. They find their expression, coherence and contents in a humanistic picture of man and world. This increases their force and strengthens their effect.

Humanism and emancipation

Now the question must be faced: How does all this work out in practice. Of course it can be expressed in meetings and discussions, in publications and conferences, by broadcast and television, through counselling and guidance. It is clear that e.g. the RPA exercises its main responsibility in the field of publicity. But it only becomes effective if it connects with the situation in which people live. This is sometimes an acute personal problem, and sometimes an experience of frustration by social abuses. Often it is both at the same time. Anyhow it's not the point to ventilate humanist ideas, but to apply them. This requires participation in the situation of the other one. One cannot approach him from the outside and one must act in solidarity with him in his position and action. However one cannot effectively support him if one identifies completely with him. This applies both to humanist education and counselling, and to social action. They often merge or complete each other.

The humanist as a fieldworker will listen and act in solidarity, also in social actions. But he will use his own standards as well. He will not force his opinion nor his personal social criticism upon others. But he will take a stand himself in general and particularly if it follows from his activities. However he will realize that there are various authentic humanist conceptions of man and society and various methods of reform and change. The purpose of humanist thought and action is enlightenment, maturity, independence, solidarity, improvement of human and social relations. This excludes manipulation of others for one's own philosophical or social aims. Besides the humanist movement as a whole will develop a policy in order to change social structures. But it only will be effective if the movement has its roots in the field from which it is nourished, and which it inspires by its ideas and activities.

Effective realization of such a program is not possible in an abstract way. It is a process between living individuals in continuous interdependence between movement and field. The movement must be able to mobilize enough capable fieldworkers. They must try and create situations in which participants can co-operate and develop their capacities. This strengthens their self-confidence and prepares them for more difficult

endeavours. At the same time it makes them more mature, both in personal and social relations. So they become forces that count in the field and that may start or support the change of dehumanizing structures. However a continual test must be carried out between the needs in the field and the basic assumptions of our work. So gradually a tight connection can be established with broader circles of the population that provide a fertile soil both for statements and actions. In that way people will be influenced by the humanistic viewpoints without being manipulated. Rather a common reflection and a common action is meant in which humanists try to start integrating processes. Co-operation with mental health workers, social workers and workers in the field of community development is needed. They all work in the same field for similar purposes.

And also modern theology is very near to this conception. One must admit that conservative forces within the churches are still preponderant and even seem to regain influence. However, modern theology apparently is the reflection of a new concept of church and faith and a new sense of man and the world. The new theology gave birth to a widespread horizontalism as against the verticalism of traditional faith. Not the perspective of heaven but the reality of earth determines this new orientation. A christian has his first commitment here and now together with fellowmen. William Hamilton speaks of the experience of the absence of God as against the absence of the experience of God. The God of the Old Testament is dead and will not return. He has annihilated himself in the death of Jesus who is the lord of life. According to Thomas Alitzer God and man lost their identity and both of them are on the way towards a new identity in which God will be everything in everyone.

With Paul van Buren the idea of commitment enters into the scene. Harvey Cox develops a theology of social change: social action completes social service. The main sin is not pride or avidity, but indolence, inertness. Not obedience or resignation are any longer the values of faith but a longing for equity. Exodus becomes a key-word. Man is on the way towards a secular realm of freedom and love. Freedom is at stake says Dorothea Solle, and it requires change, radical change of social structures. Richard Shaull wants to break through the continuity in order to realize a continuous humanization of society. It is remarkable to state the similarity between this new type of theology and progressive trends in humanist thinking. There too the issue of good will that works in the world has become topical. There too the interrelation of individual consciousness and social structures has been put on the order paper. Both christians and humanists are bound to stress the aspect of identity as a common human enterprise in 'their personal and social action, in their care for human beings and social structures.

In a world without God identity conceived as realization of a common humanity provides meaning. It is directed towards freedom, fellowship, fulfilment. They are never completely present and never completely out of reach. They are tokens of the evolution of man, even if by some catastrophe there were no future at all. They carry meaning in themselves, like love that serves for nothing and notwithstanding is self-sufficient. They create a coherence that Julian Huxley calls religious. The disappearance of God, he writes, means a recasting of religion. And he defines religion as an organised scheme of thought, including the realities of the world and evolving life in their relatedness to human destiny, and held together against the cosmic background by a spirit of reverence. And Richard Shaull says: It is a theoretical project on which men can orientate in their activities, so that they don't live from day to day without knowing what happens, but giving account to themselves of ends and means.

Humanist identity

Now it is time to consider where our explanations have led us. In the very beginning we met the problem of the humanist impact. And we stated that this problem was the fundamental issue. Our whole commitment in the present world depends on the question if we can influence the realization of a more humane community. That is a matter of adequately responding to the challenge of our time. This challenge includes the war in Viet-Nam, the violence and oppression in modern society, the dehumanization of a technological culture, the pollution of our environment, and last but not least the quest for meaning and identity in a chaotic existence. For that matter a united Europe is not a goal in itself, but a means to more effectively solve our common problems.

Our humanist movement functions only then according to its nature, if its voice expresses more real truth than other voices. Humanism can never exercise real influence if it represents an abstract idea, but it means precisely as much as it contains solutions for real needs. Therefore humanists cannot abstain from involvement in the struggles of our period. The struggle of the oppressed and the powerless, of the disturbed and the dissatisfied deserves their full support. However not just by imitating action groups or political movements and trade-unions. We must support them, but particularly by stressing the underlying human needs and promoting humanistic solutions. If we really want to guide the transition towards a new culture, we must be prepared to try and establish a new quality of life. That will be a culture of fulfilment in material sobriety, and of festivity without abundance. Self-limitation, conservation of environment and social planning require a completely novel mentality. It is particularly in this field that humanists have to preserve their own identity. We may not neglect personal grief, accusing social abuse, nor may we overlook structural causes, concentrating on personal misery. We must operate in the polarity of individual and social crisis. And in all this we must prepare and strengthen a new mental attitude.

This means that humanists don't have ready-made answers. Their contribution cannot be condensed to a simple slogan. They stand amidst the social struggle and nevertheless aim at personal fulfilment. It makes them, or should make them non-conformists in an unusual sense; rebels in all contexts; dissatisfied with present conditions, doubtful of future achievements. They fight in the service of reconciliation. Against hate they emphasize fellowship, against terror humanity. Only by a revolution within the revolution, it can be prevented that the parts just be exchanged and the play begins anew. We know that there is no ultimate goal for which present men may be sacrificed. At best there is growth, not of quantity but of quality. And we also know that tiny results require immense and concerted forces.

Humanism requires an embracing vision. There are no quick ways to realize it. Clarity of ways and means are in the long run more effective than impatient hurry. Humanist achievements can only be established by a continuous and non-spectacular process. But it can give the humanist movement a new impetus and indicate a way towards a humanist contribution in a changing situation. Maybe that all this sounds too ambitious. But only ambitious programs, thoroughly carried out, provide sufficient motivation and are worth-while to ask offers for their realization.

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