

SOCRATES, DELPHI AND HUMANISM IN THE YEAR 2001

Knowledge about life and death can take multiple forms.

It is probably not the kind of knowledge that puts human beings on the moon, but it could very well be the knowledge that one can hear and read in the Shi Ching, the classic Book of Odes, with poems dating back to the 18th century before our era.

The profound question of (post)modern humanism is that it faces a challenge with regard to its secularistic Enlightenment origin. The challenge is that its radical, sometimes fundamentalistic secularism does not appeal to the younger generations. They feel that this type of Western humanist culture does not provide sufficient answers to their questions about the meaning of life and death. The spirit of Renaissance humanism, imbued with the classic-pagan and hermetic traditions, speaks more to their imagination. I am, therefore, inclined to say that a Western humanist culture has the task of reflecting sincerely upon the meaning of the religious, atheist and pantheist philosophies, not only within our own European and American humanist tradition, but also within the Asian, African and South American ones. This reflection has to take place in the realization that many of the old traditions in Africa, Asia and South America are under the same deadly threat of extinction as animals and plants.

We, Europeans and North Americans, have to face our 19th century cultural superiority complex. We have to wonder whether 'our' secular and science-oriented humanism is complex enough to

appeal to other cultures in their struggle to keep the core values of their traditional lifestyles alive. The Japanese author, Nobel prize winner Kenzaburo Oë, admires the humanism of Erasmus and Spinoza and Western humanists are sometimes admirers of the Japanese haiku and koan traditions.

My question is whether humanism as the heir of the Enlightenment has identified itself too much with only one development of the Enlightenment, - let-s call it with Robert Pirsig, "*The classic mind*" - , and too little with "*The romantic mind*" which belongs to the Enlightenment as its alter ego. Since the second half of the 18th century, in the domain of culture, including the political ideologies, Western culture has been revolving around two movements: the classic and the romantic. The romantic movement, with authors and artists such as William Blake, Rousseau and Goethe, has appreciated European history differently than its classic counterpart. My suggestion is that a living humanist tradition has to integrate both movements into its worldview. By means of a renewed ontology and epistemology, humanists have to integrate their scientific-technological culture into a worldview that is able to embrace both the classic and the romantic tradition. This humanist worldview will embody both a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of culture. This philosophical enterprise has to be so flexible that various philosophical and spiritual options become possible within the humanist worldview without being mutually exclusive. With the words "without being mutually exclusive", I intend to say that different philosophical or spiritual traditions may have in common a set of normative, guiding ideas. I consider these normative, guiding

ideas, for example human dignity or moral autonomy, the core of the humanist tradition. The argumentation for these guiding ideas might be different in various traditions but that fact is in my view a sign of vitality and intellectual honesty: it enriches the humanist tradition. The different species of birds have in common that they are able to fly. The loss of bird species in the last decades is proof of the deterioration of our natural environment. The same process takes place with regard to languages and cultures. I can not separate the ecological disaster from the disaster of the loss of cultures. Humanists have to face this problem, because they feel the responsibility for the quality of life of everyone - Cicero's "humanitas" (humankind) - including nature. Nature and man are the concern of humanists, independent of the philosophical background of their humanism. To put it in a nutshell: someone can call herself a humanist according to the late definitions of the humanist organisations, viz. a humanism, based upon a non-supernatural, philosophic materialism. All the definitions of secularist humanism, however, imply an ethical responsibility for life, for human rights and the underlying assumption of human rights, i.e. human nature as the basic core of refusing racism, exclusive nationalism, fundamentalistic religions or ideologies, and so on.

Accepting the philosophical notion of 'human nature', implies by definition more than one specific cultural form, i.e. the modern Western one. It has also to include Zen-buddhism, various forms of African animism, and so on.

In order to clarify the boundaries between secularist humanism and spiritual humanism, it is important to discuss the anthro-

pological status of the various religions. The monotheistic religions ground their truth on a specific revelation. For that reason, they do behave not only exclusive to the non-monotheistic religions and philosophies but also to each other. Spiritual or religious humanism, however, will not accept an exclusive 'dogmatic' truth, based upon a divine revelation from outside the human dimension. It will aspire to insight and liberation by wondering and expressing the human reality within a cosmic dimension. It will be an immanent philosophy with a transcendent orientation within one and the same cosmos. This is a valid philosophical option which does not betray the own responsibility and the relative autonomy of the human person. On the contrary.

A humanism that starts from a few normative ideas such as: human nature, the own responsibility, human dignity, solidarity, respect for nature, this type of humanism must be able to open itself to other worldviews on the threshold of the third millennium.

If this development takes place, the consequence would be that humanism would become the expression of an anthropological attitude that recognizes the human reality within various worldviews. One could be a secularist humanist such as Prof. Paul Kurtz, or an animist, moslem and humanist, such as the Islam scholar Prof. Mohammed Arkoun of the Sorbonne. In an interview for the Dutch Humanist Broadcasting System, dr. Arkoun told me: "I am an animist, moslim and humanist." Analogous to Arkoun's position, one could be a buddhist humanist, a Jewish humanist, and so on. But one cannot be a religious fundamentalist humanist, because of the denial of the

anthropological nature of humanism. The anthropological nature of humanism does not, however, deny the possibility of a spiritual consciousness.

In this context, I would like to mention Socrates, who presented his search for truth and moral conduct about 2500 years ago, or Mahatma Gandhi with his religious humanist philosophy, which was highly political and strategic at the same time.

¶ In order to renew itself, humanism must approach its sources, embedded in Greek antiquity, with new eyes, with a new understanding.

The philosophy of Socrates was deeply influenced by the Eleusinian mysteries and probably also by Diotima of the Delphi oracle with the message that a wise man knows what he does not know. Therefore Socrates knows more than his fellow citizens!

Socrates and Plato, and probably Aristotle, were initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries. The importance of the mystery religions in ancient Greece can hardly be overestimated, although no knowledge has remained about their specific rituals. The initiates kept the vow of silence about the rituals so well, and the christian rejection and condemnation, especially after Christianity became a state religion, was so vehement and violent, that our historical knowledge about the mystery religions is largely based upon conjecture. A cynical aspect of the repression of the various mystery religions by Christianity is that Christianity itself is a mystery religion, which has borrowed and transformed many features of these ancient traditions into

an exclusive message of salvation with the cross as its symbol. Christianity has become intolerant in its message and has suppressed the unity of soul and body in favor of a created, immortal soul, separate from the body. Over hundreds of years, the christian revelation gained more authority than individual, inner experience. Many humanist christians were prosecuted by the christian authorities for their personal belief; for following their own road, their own tao.

Through the centuries, Christian humanists have defended the superior right of their own conscience and their right to listen to the inner voice of humanity. The same is true for religious Jews and moslems.

My renewed conclusion is that humanism in the year 2001 has to embrace all forms of open-mindedness. anti-authoritarianism and non-dogmatic teachings which appreciate the intimate relation, if not identity, between the human microcosm and the inorganic and organic macrocosm. While humanism is not philosophy, philosophy, more then theology, has been and will remain its father, nature its mother, and the arts and sciences its educators.

I already stressed the importance of the mystery religions in ancient Greece, playing a key role in the development of the philosophy of Socrates and Plato. Through the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, to mention a few Greek philosophers, the mystery religions play an important role for contemporary humanism.

I will sketch some important, common features of these mystery religions in order to clarify their important contribution to

the understanding of human life and death. My motive is simple: the existential riddles of the human condition did not change in the last millennia.

The various religious communities in ancient Greece were open to members by initiation only, but everyone could become a member: women and men (excepting the Mithras religion, which was only open to men), slaves and free men. The amazing feature is that an emperor and a slave could be members of the same community. This is a possible explanation of the strict silence concerning rituals to the outside world: one could only negate the cultural and social barriers on the condition that there was a severe separation between the domain of the mystery cults and the society at large.

The important movements in the period of 1000 before our era until about 400 after were those of Orpheus and Dionysus; Eleusis, i.e. Demeter and Persephone, Isis, Cybele and Attis, and Mithras.

Common characteristics were the initiation; purification; gnosis, i.e. knowledge through experience; drama; an individual process of liberation and, finally, cosmic experiences. To become one with the godhead was experienced in ecstasy and 'enthusiasm': 'being in the godhead'. The mysteries, especially the Orphic and Dionysian cults, integrated the vital passions and emotions through dancing into sacred orgies. To use a phrase of Tjeu van den Berk: those mystery cults came as a typhon over Homeric Greece. The difference between the Homeric style and the Greek drama and tragedies can be explained by the growing influence of these mystery religions in a city as Athens. The tragedies of Euripides are unimaginable without the influence of

7

these rites. The tragedies are a mirror for human fate and stupidity, but the tragedies offer also the possibility of a catharsis during the performance, not different from the cathartic function of theatre in our own time. In the time of Homer, godheads such as Orpheus and Dionysus did not exist, but for the citizens of Athens, two or three centuries after Homer, Orpheus and Dionysius had become more important than Zeus. Zeus belongs to a static, hierarchical, immortal, anthropomorphic world. Orpheus and Dyonisus, Demeter and Persephone, Apollo and Athene, are divine, immortal humans, fully alive and destined to demonstrate their special insights and actions. Orpheus, for example, is able to move a mountain by its lyre or with its lyre to enter the Hades. Dionysus is the symbol of regeneration in various figures. He symbolizes the transition from chaos to light, the vital energy; he is the living embodiment of the spirit of wine. Demeter and Persephone represent the experience of life-death-life, and the bitter experience of a parent, losing a child.

When I call attention to the necessity of incorporating the romantic tradition into a humanist worldview of 2001 and also, as a natural consequence, the various spiritual worldviews as mentioned before, I do nothing other than the citizens of Athens were doing since the rise of the power of their city. They were confronted with so many different, if not conflicting, interests that they had to liberate themselves from a too narrow-minded interpretation of their real interests. Philosophers, poets, authors and sculptors were presenting their fellow citizens with a new world, full of contrasts but alive and concrete.

The Eleusinian mysteries and the Diotima of Delphi have helped Socrates to become the man who knows that he does not know. Plato has used the form of the dialogue to demonstrate a simple, deep wisdom: a humanist can be recognized by his or her willingness to debate whatever issue, because every human being, by its own nature, carries something of a truth within himself. An Alchibiades, denying the godheads and probably wanting to betray his oath of silence, died in combat before being able to tell his story about the secret rituals to posterity.

I believe that Socrates was right in saying that evil is synonymous to lack of insight. If this is true, then there is only one answer: search for the universal humanness in every human being.

Fons Elders

Amsterdam, 1995.

PS The author holds the chair of Theory of worldviews and systematic humanism at the University for Humanist Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands.

9