

- This is an intelligent explanation of the nature and effect of a philosophy of life which appeals to highly educated men.

HUMANISM IN WORLD AFFAIRS

Lord Francis Williams, a Humanist, answers questions from
Kenneth Harris

May I begin by asking you what humanism means to you?

I suppose humanism means to me personally a philosophy of life, a philosophy which rejects or finds no need for any supernatural explanation of the universe, but which has as its basis what I perhaps could best describe as a sort of limited certainty, the belief that over the ages we have developed a knowledge that gives us a certain amount of certainty about a certain number of things. This certainty, while providing a guide for present action, may be altered by a new knowledge, therefore the essential thing is to be open-minded, not to believe in a system of absolutes, of blacks and whites, in which one has a closed mind.

Does this philosophy of yours have the same inspirational effect on your life as, for instance, the Christian

philosophy does — or should — have on the Christian?

I am never quite clear what, in this sense, is meant by inspiration. Perhaps I am not a very inspirational character, in that I get my sense of inspiration, my sense of uplift, which is what I suppose you mean, from great poetry, from art, from the movement of nature, from a beautiful scene, and so on, and also from my sense, of the infinite variety and wonder of ordinary human beings. I do not need anything more than that.

How did you become a humanist?

I suppose I might be described as one of those odd creatures, a second-generation humanist, in the sense that although I come from a family of a rather strong puritanical chapel background, both my father and my mother had broken away from it. The family had been

Shropshire farmers for 500 years or so. My parents had broken away from it, perhaps because it was too rigid and puritanical a doctrine for either of them — for they were both, I think, generous-minded people — to accept. Therefore I had — except when my grandfather was around — no particular compulsions of religion in my youth, and I did not suffer, as many people have suffered, any great sort of traumatic experience in trying to break away from a doctrine which had been put before me as the absolute necessity of life.

Do you think that humanism ever can be the thing in international affairs, international relations, that Christianity, for instance, has been and is today?

I would say that it is in a sense the inevitable and natural approach in international affairs. Christianity has a substantial force, but one has to realize that Christianity is only one among many great religions in the world, and in terms of the clashes of great power blocs, only one among many mytho-

logies. It seems to me that one of the significant facts in the world today — many people find it surprising — is the immense passionate desire on the part of peoples of all nations to believe themselves to be democratic. They do not always act, in our view, democratically, but there is no new country that comes into existence, even if it immediately puts its opposition into prison, which does not declare that it is doing so in the name of democracy, in pursuit of the democratic ideal. Humanism can help here because it is essentially a democratic concept, because it believes, as democracy believes, in a continuing dialogue, in an open-minded examination of each new issue as it comes along, to try to determine what is best and most practical in the circumstances of the time as a guide to a common meeting-ground, without the inevitable restrictions of a rigid doctrine, religious or political.

Can humanism ever be the basis of understanding between two peoples that Christianity could be and has been?

Christianity has been the basis of a great deal of misunderstanding between peoples as well, hasn't it? I mean, let us not get all confused by the myth that Christianity throughout its history has been a great common binding force in the world. There has been nothing so severe as the great religious wars and conflicts. I would say humanism can be that link between peoples, simply because what the humanist in fact is saying is: 'We must work in the belief that, so far as we can see, Man is the chief agent, and the highest expression so far of the evolutionary principle. In so far as he has a dedication it is to help forward that force of evolution. He can only do so by being constantly ready to explore new ideas, to look at new political or economic principles as they come up, not as challenges to a prepared, established position which he holds, but as possibly a new system, a new idea, a new conception which is worth examination, some of which may be no good, parts of which may be capable of being absorbed into other systems, so that

you have this constantly moving, fluid approach'.

One of the things that struck me about humanism, as a result of these inquiries I have been making is that to be a humanist, a man has to be a pretty mature personality and also a man educated — even if self-educated — considerably above the average. Doesn't this make it difficult for humanism to become acceptable to, for instance, primitive people?

I do not know that I would accept your premise. To be a theologian, to be a philosopher of any kind in the higher ranges of that philosophy, one has to be a fairly sophisticated and educated person. But I would have thought that humanism, for example, was very close to the approach of the ordinary English person with his concept of tolerance, of looking at the other chap's point of view, and so on. When you get to very primitive communities, either Christianity or humanism has a problem in breaking away from concrete, conceptions of physical gods, of physical totems and so on, which have come to be important; but I would

not have thought that the break from that kind of primitive conception to humanism was more difficult than the break to Christianity — in fact in many ways I would have thought it less difficult.

I wonder too, whether humanism can be effective in international affairs in the way that Christianity certainly has been, and sometimes is today — Christianity's effect on the slave trade, for instance? Is humanism sufficiently specific to apply to international problems?

I would think so; and when you say 'Christianity's effect on the slave trade', this was only true of a particular group of Christians. What I think appals one, as one goes back historically, is the way in which people who were in many ways very genuine Christians were able to accept either the slave trade or the idea that children of seven or eight should work in the mines, and the fact that this did not conflict with their idea of Christianity. They were strong church-goers, strong Christians, but they had persuaded themselves that they were of a different race, or a dif-

ferent group of people. I think the humanist could never do that, because the humanist sees the whole human race as one, at various stages of evolutionary development, and his concern is to help on that evolutionary development by exploring with an open mind every possible means of so doing.

A couple of weeks ago the Archbishop of Canterbury made a statement about the use of force in Southern Rhodesia. As far as he was concerned, he said, he was making a statement of Christian principles. Could a leading humanist say anything about some international problem in the same way as the Archbishop did?

Yes; I do not think he would say that he was making a statement of humanist principles; I think he would say that he was making a statement of what seemed to him to be intelligent and human principles. He would not try to claim the authority of a great organized body behind him — and indeed the Archbishop got into a deal of trouble by doing just that. It has struck me very much recently on various occasions

when I have been marching in the same lobby with the Archbishop of Canterbury — on various issues like the Bill to end hanging, and so on — the virulence with which he has been attacked by other Christians for behaving as they thought in an un-Christianlike way.

Turning now to general international affairs, take the permanent East-West conflict, for instance. What can the humanists contribute to that?

I believe to the humanist the East-West conflict represents movements by human groups to find solutions of human problems: solutions which at the moment differ, but each of which may contain something from which the other could borrow, and from which one can learn — unless one gets oneself into the sort of position that that great Secretary of State in America, Mr. Dulles, once got himself into: the belief that there is an absolute black and an absolute white in international affairs. One's attitude must be that each approach to a solution

of political affairs is worth examining, and perhaps worth borrowing from.

You have lived a very busy life; you have been engaged in a great many causes; you have worked for social reform. But now you are moving towards the period in life when you have to sit down and take things rather more easily. Do you think that humanism as a faith will be as attractive to you in your old age as it was when you were a busy man? Do you think you might perhaps long for the consolation of a religion like Christianity, for instance?

I do not think so. In a way this problem — if it is a problem — came to me about three years ago, when I had a coronary and was laid on my back, and it seemed to me to be quite possible that this might be the end. I found no sense at all of anxiety about the end, but a great deal of interest in considering what would be happening to mankind when I was gone from it. — *From The Listener, Dec. 2, 1965.*