

HUMANISM IN EUROPE

by RALPH CHAMPION

LAST year when I spent five months in Britain and one month on the Continent, I met many people in various humanist and freethought groups and so emerged with a highly fragmented picture of European humanism. A different person might have gained different impressions, for instance Max Praed, the Armidale Humanist, was impressed by the trend towards encounter groups and sensitivity training which I only discovered in Milan.

There are four major freethought groups in Britain. The largest, the *British Humanist Association*, has seen its membership decline alarmingly in the last few years. The Association has its headquarters in London and there are local groups throughout the land. The B.H.A. runs a housing service for old people and they obtained good publicity when they released their pamphlet "People First," part of which was printed in "The Australian Humanist" in the Spring edition last year.

The publishing arm of British freethought is the *Rationalist Press Association* and its associate Pemberton Books. The R.P.A. is losing money and so is living on capital accumulated in the past. The monthly journal has been renovated, re-named "The New Humanist" and is now on public sale. It is losing even more money per issue than before but at least it is on public display whereas previously the magazine only went out to card-carrying Humanists.

The National Secular Society, small but very active, helps keep up with the evil deeds of the

church. Until the end of last year they brought out a very lively weekly newspaper "The Free-thinker" but this was losing so much money that it is now appearing monthly. The Society received a lot of help in recent years from an Australian expatriate, David Tribe.

The South Place Ethical Society is based at Conway Hall in Red Lion Square next to the West End of London. Under the driving leadership of Peter Cadogan it is the only humanist group to show any growth of membership in recent years. However, there are trends in the society which cause many people to fear that it may become overtly religious again. (Over the last hundred years it evolved from a religious body to a humanist one under the influence of a line of distinguished leaders including William Fox and Moncure Conway.) Peter Cadogan is particularly keen on the idea of Utopias and after I wrote an article on Popper's social philosophy for "The Freethinker" Peter replied with a critical letter, to which I replied, to which he . . . which I . . . etc, culminating in his declaration that his January sermon would be titled "Against Karl Popper: in Defence of Utopias."

In Amsterdam I stayed for a few days with a young fellow who had been involved with the "Provos" and more recently with the "Kabouters" or "Elves" who with a program of peace and love obtained several seats on the Amsterdam City Council. They aimed to promote a sort of fun revolution and to this end they set up an

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"Orange Free State" in the main square and smoked pot in council meetings. They also helped needy people to paint their homes, went shopping for invalid pensioners and organised the occupation of empty houses.

In Holland there are two large Humanist bodies as well as the headquarters of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. I did not find out much about the *Dutch Humanist League*. In 1966 it had 16,000 members but since then there have been rumours of internal strife. All I had time to discover was that membership was declining and the financial situation was not as healthy as it used to be.

Humanitas, an autonomous, secular organisation for social work, in 1966 had 23,000 members organised into 88 local chapters. The society is directed by a board of 11 members; its original objective was to provide personalised social welfare for people with no religion. I spoke to a young social worker in *Humanitas* who is extremely unhappy with the conservative attitude of the board and the bureaucratic way the work is done. He was thinking seriously of leaving to work as a grass-roots community organiser.

In Utrecht I visited the headquarters of the *International Humanist and Ethical Union*—this consists of a room containing Ernst van Brakel and an assistant. They send material to member organisations, other affiliated groups, and scattered individual members in out-of-the-way places like Portugal, Kenya and South America. The N.S.W. Humanist Society has been skirmishing for some time with the I.H.E.U. over the payment of affiliation fees. We are not happy to go on paying at the present rate when all we see in return is a lot of irrelevant paper sent by air mail. We are told that if we want an international organisation we have to be prepared to pay for it. In reply I pointed out that in Australia we have no accumulated assets to speak of, no paid workers and if there is to be an effective international body they had better make us a recipient of aid. Or at least they should let us off some of the payments.

Two French bodies are nominally affiliated with the I.H.E.U. but one has folded. The other is the *French Educational League* where I waited for half a day while they found an interpreter for me. The League is a coalition of some 30,000 miscellaneous social, cultural and adult educational associations, gathered into 103 federations concerned with sports, theatre, folklore, music and dancing. After my first visit to Paris I took a trip on the Rhine and went on to Hanover to visit the headquarters of the *Union of Free Religious Societies*. There are two other free-

thinking groups in Germany, the "Free thinkers" and the "Monists" but these are quite insignificant. The Union began when Johannes Ronge defected from the Catholic Church early in the nineteenth century. It was banned for a time in 1848, again in 1914 and again by Hitler in 1933. The Union is having trouble with its name and its general secretary assured me that it would be changed to something like "The Humanist Society" within 10 or 20 years.

The German community contains 80% Protestants, 15% Catholics, and 5% freethinkers. The Catholics are concentrated in Bavaria where they make up 80% of the population.

In the Union there are 40,000 paying members gathered into 300 communities of various sizes. Eighty per cent. of members support the Social Democrat party and several members serve in the national parliament and on local councils. Recently the Union has organised a treaty with the government according to which the Union receives 120,000 marks per year, with an extra 5 or 10% each year to allow for inflation. This sum just about matches the amount collected from membership fees and so the organisation is very healthy financially. At their headquarters in Hanover they have four full-time speakers in addition to the general secretary. They have premises in seven other cities to serve some of the larger local communities.

Every six weeks the Union is allowed to broadcast for a quarter of an hour over the radio stations at Hamburg, Cologne, Frankfurt and Munich. In any school where 12 or more children ask for it, they can be given, in place of religious instruction, a secular moral education course organised by a member of a humanist panel. Not long ago a new chair of Humanist Instruction was set up at Germany's leading teachers training college.

From Hanover I went on through Hamburg meaning to visit Oslo. This would have involved changing trains at Copenhagen in the middle of the night but it was so cold outside and so warm inside that I stayed where I was and next morning arrived in Stockholm. There I spent a day before taking an overnight train to Oslo where I stayed for three days with Dr. Kristian Horn and his wife who together run the *Humanist and Ethical League of Norway*. This small but growing society receive a subsidy from the government because they are classified as an educational and cultural group. Their main activity, which is expanding at a tremendous rate, is providing a course of secular moral education followed by a kind of secular confirmation service for children round about the time they leave school.

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Dr. Horn introduced me to a man in the university philosophy department who had translated Popper's "The Poverty of Historicism" into Norwegian and I spent some time with two other philosophers who were very interested in Popper's recent work. Dr. Horn knew a little about Popper's work which was an interesting change because elsewhere when I asked my humanist contacts about Popper I was met with a blank look.

Back in Paris I visited Professor Jac Monod, Director of the Pasteur Institute. He was in the French Resistance during the war, was a friend of Albert Camus, won a Nobel Prize for his work in molecular biology and recently created a stir with his book "Chance and Necessity" in which he argued against the world views of Christianity and Marxism. He is a great admirer of Popper and he is writing the introduction to "The Logic of Scientific Discovery." He is also trying to persuade his own publishers to do a translation of "The Open Society and its Enemies."

In Milan I visited "*Centro Conscienza*" which has consultative status with the I.H.E.U. It was set up in 1938 as a centre of spiritual culture. Its aim was not to raise criticism of an intellectual nature against the times, which under Mussolini was probably very tactful. Instead it was "To encourage the study of spiritual problems, particularly under the scientific, philosophical, moral, social, artistic, religious standpoints."

Apart from the headquarters in Milan, there are branches at Rome, Bergamo, Turin, Florence and Desio. There has been considerable expansion in the last 10 years and now there are about 1,500 people involved in Milan of which about half are actually members. Members are expected to be heavily involved in the organisation apart from contributing their membership fee. There is hardly any government assistance and this suits the organisation because it makes them freer to do what they want. They have two kinds of courses; in one there is a series of lectures for the first part of the year, ending in April, and the rest of the year is taken up with discussion groups. These courses are concerned with the relation of general culture to the self. The other type of course is for children from five months to university age. Here the emphasis is upon degrees of self-awareness, self-actualisation, the creation of a pleasing environment by means of flower arrangement and so on, and the creation of myths and tales.

There is a newly formed Humanist group in the Republic of Ireland. Val Oakes of the N.S.W. Humanist society visited Dublin and saw some of their activities which she found most impressive. There are a number of other groups affiliated with the I.H.E.U. outside Europe, for instance in Korea, Pakistan, and India.

The international humanist movement is alive, even if all of its parts are not well.

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