The Humanist Moment

A common framework of values

After conflict, the task of rebuilding national identity requires that all areas of culture should be mobilised. In this, an important role falls to the domain of ideas, beliefs and values. Very frequently, the aftermath of conflict has been accompanied by an upsurge in the role of religion as a key organising framework within which issues confronting the nation can be articulated. In recent years, religion has played this role in European countries such as the components of former Yugoslavia, emerging from civil war. This echoes the experience of countries such as Poland and Lithuania emerging from communism. Conflicts in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa have similarly been followed by an increase in the practice of Islam. In these cases, religious movements have been adopted as a common framework of beliefs and values around which a nation could unite. In France, a similar phenomenon was apparent after the defeat of 1940, when the Vichy regime mobilised Catholic piety in support of its National Revolution. But with the collapse of the regime, the credibility of Catholicism was severely damaged, and the French political and intellectual elites had to look elsewhere for a unifying ideological framework. Although they succeeded in assembling a bricolage of secular and religious symbols and in finding a common vocabulary to articulate the circumstances of the time, they still needed a framework of values to underpin them and provide a degree of coherence. This was the context in which humanism emerged suddenly and unexpectedly as the uncontested framework of values within which the debates and struggles of the period were expressed. The phenomenon has passed virtually unnoticed by subsequent commentators, yet it provided the ideological adhesive for
French national unity, a precious and fragile field in 1944, and defined the parameters of what was thinkable, or at least speakable.

Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘rules of the game’ is useful for understanding how this came about. He suggests that any field of activity is structured by a set of rules which are accepted, usually implicitly, by all the participants. The rules determine what actions are legitimated and how a participant or group of participants may gain ascendancy within the field. In France in 1945, the field of ideas acquired a new set of rules, or at least an extensively revised set of underlying values. These values defined what could be said or thought, and how writers and thinkers might gain recognition. They were presented explicitly as a framework of humanism.

Humanism in the French sense is a somewhat eclectic notion, which has proven to be more persuasive the less closely it is analysed, and most persuasive of all when it is taken as an unstated assumption. In this it bears some resemblance to the force of gravitation, which is not strong enough to be observed in small-scale interactions but exerts a bonding effect at a large scale. Normally, humanism is not clearly visible in the detail of intellectual debate, but functions nevertheless to hold the cultural field together. In the France of the immediate post-war period, when the cultural field was radically disrupted, the French political and intellectual elite expounded humanism explicitly, finding in it a consensual means of rebuilding a measure of cultural unity. Like much of the ‘new’ thinking of the time, its elements were largely to be found in the 1930s, where they had emerged in a marginal and diffuse form. The circumstances in which the war ended then provided the environment in which the elements could be brought together and could flourish.

The humanist voice

French humanism was, and remains, largely distinct from the humanist movements in Britain, the United States, the Netherlands and other countries, which seek to offer secular alternatives to religious belief, and in some cases promote militant atheism. On the contrary, the French advocates of humanism sought to include the main religious movements within it, and drew extensively on traditions of spirituality. The main features of French post-war humanism were represented in a collection of lectures delivered in 1946 under the auspices of ‘L’Amitié française’, a cultural association established by Catholic review Temps présent. Published under the sonorous title Les grands