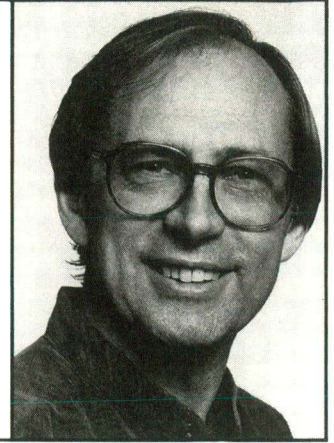

FREE INQUIRY Interview

Levi Fragell on Humanism in Norway



FREE INQUIRY: What has happened in Norway in terms of the growth of the humanist movement is very interesting to us throughout the world because your organization has grown to more than 40,000 members.

Levi Fragell: Yes. It's more than 1 percent of the adult population.

FI: How many people who are not members of the Human-Etisk Forbund (Human Ethical Association) identify with humanism?

Fragell: We had two different scientific polls. The first found that 19 percent of the population identified with humanism; and in the second 20 percent called themselves humanists. I think those percentages are constantly growing.

FI: When did this shift in public opinion and the commitment to humanism begin?

Fragell: We've seen a steady rise in unbelief since the turn of the last century. Norwegians were influenced by naturalism and scientific developments in Western Europe. A number of important scientists and writers were unbelievers. Fridtjof Nansen won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922. The most well-known writer is Henrik Ibsen; others include Bjoernstjerne Bjoernson, Arna Garborg, and Alexander Kielland. All wrote humanists books in a country with a strong Lutheran church, forming an opposition counter-culture that became more and more secular. However, an official humanist organization was not founded until 1956. We are rather young.

FI: Who founded that?

Fragell: A biologist and professor at the University of Oslo, Kristian Horn. About two hundred and fifty of Norway's most prominent academicians, lawyers, and psychiatrists gathered at the first meeting, attracting attention nationwide. It was a good start, but the movement didn't grow much after that.

FI: When you became secretary general in 1976 how many

members were there?

Fragell: About 1,700.

FI: So the Human-Etisk Forbund has grown dramatically since you became executive director. What is your background?

Fragell: As a young man, I was a successful preacher in the Pentecostal church. But later I lost my faith completely. I became a newspaperman and then worked in public relations. I was the press secretary for the Minister of Justice for several years. About that time I was elected president of Human-Etisk Forbund and later secretary general. Much of the organization's growth took place during the late seventies and early eighties.

FI: What were your policies that were responsible for the growth?

Fragell: The church was against women's liberation, abortion, and homosexuality, and it wanted more influence in the schools. People were very much against those attitudes. And we were there all the time saying, "We are against the church's policies; we are fighting those forces in society; join us." We attracted the people who were angry—women, homosexuals, and a lot of others who did not agree with the church.

FI: Were there other groups opposed to the church's stands on feminism, abortion, and so on?

Fragell: Yes, but not on the basis of life stance. We were the only organization that offered an ethical basis for opposing the church in these matters. We said that you don't have to be a Christian to be a decent person—you can be a humanist; we have an alternative. So they say, "We are pro-abortion" based on valid, humanist philosophy.

FI: In other words you were unique in the country in that you were offering an alternative to religion and showing a new ethical basis and life stance?

Fragell: Yes. But we never tried to copy the church when it came to the social opportunities and emotional support that religion can offer.

FI: What do you mean by that?

Fragell: For example, the religious who are truly dedicated come together often—at least once and sometimes three times a week. But we did not try to copy that meeting pattern because we didn't have the resources or staff to support it, and we

Levi Fragell is former executive director of Norway's humanist organization, Human-Etisk Forbund, and is now editor of its magazine. He was formerly a co-president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).

didn't think people were interested in coming together so often. So instead of imitating the church model we recruited members who were already active on issues of broader, popular interest, like women's rights, environmental protection, and peace. We charged a \$15 annual membership fee. We did not want to charge much, because we didn't want to organize only the people who were so dedicated that humanism was their whole life. We want members to support humanism because it is a good cause.

FI: So a lot of people are supporting your cause without dedicating themselves to humanism?

Fragell: They want to support us because they think we do and say the right things.

FI: How many Norwegians are members of the Lutheran church and what is it called?

Fragell: It is the Anglican State Church of Norway, and 85 percent of the people are members.

FI: What other denominations are represented in Norway?

Fragell: We have the Evangelical churches, the Pentecostal and Baptist churches, the Catholic church, and Muslims.

FI: How many Muslims?

Fragell: About 30,000.

FI: So the Human-Etisk Forbund is the only alternative to religion in Norway. What services do you offer?

Fragell: We hold name-giving ceremonies for families when a baby is born. We hire a room in the center of the city. We get city halls free of charge, because society says that this is a community responsibility. And families come with their small children—ten, twenty, or thirty couples at a time—the families fill up the rooms. We have music and speeches, and the atmosphere is lively and pleasant. The children have actually already been named by their parents, but we announce the name to the gathering and give the families plaques.

FI: Who conducts the service?

Fragell: A professional humanist counselor or a volunteer. The person must have a certain style and be able to speak to an assembly.

FI: They also perform funeral services. What do you do there?

Fragell: We counsel the families and offer comfort. This is also done by volunteers. All of the technical aspects, such as setting up the coffin and the flowers, are done by the undertaker. We come in and arrange the songs and instrumental pieces.

FI: Who actually delivers the eulogy?

Fragell: One of the humanist volunteers. He or she leads the ceremony and speak about the deceased.

FI: Is the eulogy written out?

Fragell: No. It follows a certain pattern but it can be changed according to the wishes of the family.

FI: So anyone in any area can call you up and request such a service?

Fragell: Anybody—church member or nonchurch member. Anyone who wants a secular humanist funeral will get it.

FI: Are the services held in special halls or at the cemetery?

Fragell: There are crematories, and there are cemeteries that have places where anyone can have a ceremony.

FI: Do you also marry people?

Fragell: No, and this has been an item for discussion. Norway already has a secular marriage system. People can go to the Justice of the Peace and get married. That is why we have not given marriage a priority. Maybe we will do it later because some of our members say they *want* to be married by a humanist, in a humanist ceremony.

FI: Do you provide any other services, and what are they?

Fragell: We do civil confirmations. In the Protestant church, every young person at the age of fourteen or fifteen is confirmed. When we started our service 96 percent of the population were members of the church, and those who were not were considered very peculiar—they were looked upon as a very strange minority. For young people especially this was a very difficult position. If they were not confirmed, they did not have a celebration or get presents. We decided that we had to do something so that people wouldn't have to come hypocrites to fit in society. We created a secular alternative to religious confirmation. It is a written ceremony, and very popular. About five thousand youngsters are confirmed each year. Since hundreds of people attend each ceremony, we reach about 50,000 people each year this way, most of whom are not members. But many of them join us later.

We are also dealing with legal questions—attacking the church-state system and the constitution. Moral education as an alternative to religious instruction is a very central topic. This has been introduced by us into the schools, taken up by the government, and accepted as an alternative by people who are not church members.

FI: Is this taught in all the schools in Norway?

Fragell: All the schools, everywhere. And this is the fruit of our work.

FI: How many years or hours does the child take moral education?

Fragell: In grades 1 through 9 it is compulsory. The children take moral education two hours a week every year.

FI: And if the child is religious?

Fragell: Christianity is a compulsory subject in the schools for all members of the state church.

FI: What do Roman Catholic children do?

Fragell: They take the Christianity lessons, which are biased toward Protestantism but accepted by most Catholics. If they want to they can join the moral education classes.

FI: And what about Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and others who belong to non-Christian denominations?

Fragell: Those students are exempt from the moral education and Christianity classes. They attend their own religious schools on Fridays if they wish.

FI: How many children take the moral education courses?

Fragell: At the moment, about 14,000, a minority of the student population.

FI: Who are the teachers of these courses?

Fragell: Those who teach moral education must have some training at a university or teacher's college in the subject of moral education.

FI: They're not necessarily humanists are they?

Fragell: Most are. Some are even believers, but that causes problems and some parents protest.

FI: And you have textbooks and a curriculum?

Fragell: Yes.

FI: What other projects are you engaged in?

Fragell: We take our battle for secularization anywhere there are ministers—hospitals, prisons, etc. We protest the monopoly of religion and we make proposals that would give humanists an equal role. If the minister in question is paid and the institution or organization lacks money to pay for additional personnel, we volunteer our services.

FI: And do you have accepted humanist representatives in the armed services, prisons, and hospitals?

Fragell: We are in hospitals now and we are getting into a few prisons, but one problem for an organization modeled like ours is that we do not have enough active people.

FI: Do you have a program to train them?

Fragell: We have weekend training courses and seminars. And when it comes to funerals and some of the more somber duties we pay money for people to perform them.

FI: Do the families or friends pay or are the costs covered by the association?

Fragell: If the person is not a member, he or she will pay all the costs. Members get free funerals. As for the other services, the parents pay for them. So in a way, these services finance themselves.

FI: Do you receive money from the state?

Fragell: Yes. That is the main source of our income. We receive fifty dollars per member—with forty thousand members that's two million dollars from the state.

FI: Do you publish any magazines?

Fragell: We have our own magazine that is free to all members. It is also distributed to school libraries, to stimulate discussion and to be available reference material.

FI: Do you do radio and television also?

Fragell: Not in the same way that you do in the United States. You can buy time on a station. We have to go to the Norwegian Broadcast Corporation and say that we want to be on certain programs, and ask them to contact us. They then sometimes make programs on which we are interviewed. I appear on the radio about ten times every year; some of my co-workers are on every week. We are on television about five times a year.

FI: Are the Christians on much?

Fragell: Yes. They are on all the time.

FI: How many radio stations or television channels are there in Norway?

Fragell: We have two government-financed television channels. We also have some cable stations, and we are receiving commercial stations by satellite. I would say 75 percent of our population listens to the state radio and watches state television.

FI: What other activities are you engaged in?

Fragell: We try to have some intellectual and spiritual activities. We arrange meetings, but they are not like the meetings of most humanist organizations in America. We do not invite people together to listen to a nice talk. We arrange controversial meetings where we debate hot topics. The discussions are continued in seminars and our magazine, which, incidentally, has been the leading critic of the New Age. We are now taking up skepticism.

FI: Do you have local groups that meet?

Fragell: We have 150 local groups and some of them meet once a month. Most will meet four or five times a year. Their get-togethers include discussions with local clergymen and social events like family picnics. Before or after Christmas there are always family gatherings. We try to mesh with our existing cultural traditions, not get secular people to go to a new kind of church.

FI: What do you think is the most important factor in building humanism in Norway?

Fragell: I think that the most important reason for our success is that we are a grass-roots movement appealing to ordinary people. For example, we realize that what people need when they dare to leave the church are ceremonies to mark milestones in their lives. We welcome those who want to become dedicated humanists, but they are one in a hundred.

FI: So, in that sense, your approach is non-intellectual, but it does attract a wide range of people.

Fragell: Yes. We give them an identity so when they go out into society they can say, "I'm not a Christian, I'm a humanist."

FI: Very interesting. Now, do you try to influence politicians, or do you have any political figures who identify with humanism?

Fragell: Yes, we always had a group in Parliament, perhaps twelve or fifteen people, who are members and help us with little matters in law. When we have a labor government we always have four or five members of the government who are humanists.

FI: What percentage of people go to church in Norway?

Fragell: Eighty-five percent of the population are members and fifty-six percent are Christians, but less than 10 percent go to church, according to our poll.

FI: What would you advise people in other countries who are interested in developing humanist organizations to do to follow the Norwegian model?

Fragell: The conditions are very different from country to country, but I think that it's always necessary to demonstrate that Christianity is quite incapable of being a trustworthy basis for modern culture. Even a child of five years says that it is nonsense. It is hypocrisy to continue to hold up this religion as the basis of our society. People don't really believe in it. Why should this old mythology be taught in the schools?

FI: So you're saying that humanism provides a clear rational or scientific criticism and an alternative cosmic outlook and life stance?

Fragell: It should be made clear that humanism is a life stance that opposes religion and supernaturalism in all forms.

FI: Is criticism of religion strong in your efforts?

Fragell: Yes, in fact we have been criticized for being too strong in this regard, but I think it has been necessary to demonstrate where we stand.

FI: Can you define humanism in positive terms? You reject a belief in God, but what then?

Fragell: We keep our definitions of humanism very simple. We use the ideas of the old Greek philosophers, like "Man is the measure of all things" from Protagoras. We also draw

from the many ideas connected with accepting life on Earth and using the human mind for arriving at central values. But to deal with practical matters we have made it a part of our bylaws that we should build upon the ideas and the principles in the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights.

FI: Looking at the world scene there have been such rapid changes recently. What do you think the prospects for humanism are? First, in Norway, will you continue to grow, and what about other places?

Fragell: I think humanism could be the new basis for ethics. We have to have some frame of reference for ethics, and I think humanism could be that reference in the next century because religions are not trustworthy anymore; they're outmoded. But I think we have problems in making this point because we do not have a clear identity. People don't realize what humanism is. But I haven't given up hope, and I think we could—and Paul Kurtz has suggested this—be missionaries. This has been very controversial, partly because the term is associated with religion.

FI: Do you think *ambassadors* would be better?

Fragell: Yes. In the Third World, the humanist ambassadors could encourage people to give up the old, dysfunctional religions, which in all respects stop development. For instance,

in Indian villages, when a well is full of bacteria, a priest is called for to read mantras over the well. Then the people think it is safe to drink the water and more die. Humanists should go into the village and say, "You cannot drink this water, it must be clean."

FI: So you think that humanism is relevant to today's world problems?

Fragell: Absolutely. I believe in going to the Third World, which has more than half the world's population, with humanism.

FI: Many questions have been raised about what is humanism. Maybe we can end by your giving a succinct definition of humanism.

Fragell: We must find the line that divides humanism and religion. Humanism is a cause and ethical life stance with all the connotations that go with the humanist tradition. But it is very important in addition to forcefully say that humanism is nontheistic, naturalistic, and secular. And if we are not willing to say those things, we disappear into the shadow of religion.

FI: And it involves what from the individual?

Fragell: I heartily support self-determination, self-reliance, and responsibility in the individual. These are some of the most positive attributes of humanism. ●

Why I Am Not a Fundamentalist

Skipp Porteous

Salvation is not a victimless crime. I know, for as a youth I became a victim. I was "saved" at the age of eleven. I call it a crime because my "salvation" was not by chance; it was carefully orchestrated by misguided people who thought they were doing God a favor. Their actions sent me on a long, arduous journey.

The scheme was launched after a fundamentalist minister came to the small town in which I was reared. He and his wife employed two methods to build a congregation. First, they stole "sheep" from other churches. Second, they resorted to deceptive devices. One

was an after-school arts-and-crafts club that they offered without charge in their home. Its purpose was to entrap innocent youngsters from the village. I fell prey. Soon, those who attended the club were invited to Billy Graham movies on Sunday nights at the little Baptist church. Who could resist free movies? Our town didn't have a movie theater and only one channel was available on television.

I was vulnerable and the church exerted a strong influence on me. Week after week I listened to Billy Graham's sermons, followed by the pastor's pleas to "accept Christ." Soon I was convinced that without Jesus I was a vile sinner destined to spend eternity in hell. I had to make a choice. I chose Jesus.

Through my new affiliation I spent two summer stints at the fundamentalist

Word of Life "boot camp" at Schroon Lake, New York, which reinforced my life as a "new creature." Fundamentalist tradition was pounded into us at Word of Life in more ways than one. As soldiers of the Lord we weren't taught how to turn the other cheek. In fact, one summer, after beating the devil out of an opponent, I became a Word of Life boxing champ.

Upon returning home from Word of Life I wanted to preach the Gospel in the streets of our town. Perhaps to save the family from embarrassment, my mother forbade me.

Despite a brief but happy and free interval as a back-sliding teenager, I remained brainwashed. Fear of being out of God's favor hounded me.

At twenty-one, I married and moved to Los Angeles. Soon I enrolled in the Lighthouse of International Foursquare

Skipp Porteous is the editor of the quarterly newsletter Walk Away, from which this article is reprinted.
