

## Interview with Silo in Florence, Italy. 14 July 1998 - TeleMontecarlo 2 National TV

*Journalist: What are the cultural roots and social perspectives in which the Humanist Movement was born?*

Silo: The Movement was born on the geographic and cultural periphery of Western civilization. And so from its inception, from the first study groups 30 years ago, the Movement was very unstable because of its distance from the cultural centers of the West, very unstable and very open to different influences from other cultures. This also led us to search for those other roots in different cultures in the measure that the Movement expanded.

*Journalist: What are the characteristics of a humanist?*

Silo: I imagine that the characteristics of each humanist are different, because there is no decalogue of behavior. But in general we can say that humanists are people who love the equality of human beings, who fight for non-discrimination in all fields, who seek not only equal rights for all people but especially equal opportunities - something that is pretty difficult to achieve. Humanists do not usually focus on the success of their actions but rather what's important for them is that their action has meaning. So this is a behavior that is pretty "anti-success", with a lot of passion for the action being carried out. Humanists believe that diversity is important and that it should converge in a direction towards the universal human nation.

*Journalist: In your position as founder of the Movement, can you be considered a kind of teacher or spiritual guide? What is your role with regard to those who are in the Movement?*

Silo: The role of teacher, of spiritual guide I think is pretty far removed from what happens with me personally. Because really, no one is teaching anyone anything. Rather, what's happening is that the concerns and searches of the people are brought together. In that sense, I see myself more as an interpreter of the needs of people than someone who gives lessons to others about what they should do.

*Journalist: The Humanist Movement exists in several countries. How has it developed? Are there differences between the different countries or can it be considered a universal type of movement?*

Silo: The Movement was developed from the start in a very remote place, within the historical context of military dictatorships. It is a movement that from its origins has sought freedom, so trampled on at the time by military juntas and other disorders of that time. It developed largely through the persecution suffered, since from the beginning many people were imprisoned, many people were disappeared, others died, and people went mainly to Europe, because there were personal connections there and somehow cultural ones too, in places like Italy and Spain. Unlike other exiles who went to these places and remained enclosed within themselves, the Movement opened up and quickly made contact with people of similar sensibility. So this thing called globalization that many people are now discovering, has existed for the Movement since the beginning. We are talking about 30 years ago. There existed the idea to develop in all directions, considering the planet as a reality which was necessarily facing new times. There is much more we could say about all this, but in general this is what happened.

*Journalist: In your work you often address the topic of change, of transformation. What exactly does this mean for you?*

Silo: For me the point about this topic of change, which is very important and which does appear in several works, is that no change is possible in people without a change in the context in which these people live. And inversely, one cannot talk about social change if the mentality of the people themselves does not change. In our view the human being is not something isolated - no one can change if they do not change the conditions in which they live, but it's not enough to change the conditions in which they live because that does not cover the whole spectrum of desires, ambitions, successes, failures. The desire for change depends on the individual, it doesn't depend only on the objective conditions. So for us the theme of change is the most important theme. But it cannot be proposed in dichotomous terms as it's been proposed up to now. For us, there exists a social reality, and there is a human being. The social reality, with its advantages and disadvantages, and human beings, with their personal searches - which are not transferable from one to another, from one social group to another. Personal realities are always unique, and they should be taken into account in practice, in overcoming one's own contradictions, overcoming interpersonal contradictions, and then in social change - the overcoming of this inhuman system that is based upon oppressive conditions for all humanity.

*Journalist: Let's talk a bit more about this concept. Lately there is a lot of talk of internal searches, of a new spirituality of growth and discovery of one's own self. But these are actions directed solely towards oneself. It's rare to hear talk of these actions as an opening towards others. But for you it's different. I quote a phrase from the book *Humanize the Earth*: "You will be able to do nothing for yourself if you think only of yourself." Can you explain this concept for those who are listening? Thank you.*

Silo: Yes, that is our thinking, which has been highlighted by citing that part of the book. Nothing can be done with actions that end in oneself, if they do not end in others, and if there is no intention of their ending

positively to transform the other and his circumstances. But we should be quite kind and cautious with these things, because it is not about forcing anyone's will. We are in a very special moment in history in which a tremendous spirituality and an enormous search is unfolding. So it is not a question of forcing people in one direction. Let people search in the way that seems best to them. If people believe that by looking only at themselves they are going to achieve great progress, they may be mistaken - or not. We're not telling people what to do. But in this great spirituality that is unfolding, there are also many currents, many experiments. And unlike some elitists, I would say, or some perfectionists, we accept all forms of that new spirituality. Even those that may be considered superstition. Because the object that people are seeking doesn't matter, what matters is the internal tendency that searches for that object of inner liberation or inner liberty. To finish this story of the rationalism of the last century, I would say that in principle all spirituality is good. And I don't think it's the time to set up new inquisitions regarding spiritual searching. At different levels people do what they can, with the data they have. So, probably, some believe that by reading coffee grounds they can advance toward their future. Other currents, of more informed people, probably choose a direction for their search from theories or books. Other currents that come from other life experiences tend to go towards a kind of spiritual ataraxia, as was the case in the time of the Greek decadence, or Roman decadence - a spiritual intrepidity, not worrying about anything in order to achieve liberation. Today we see that there are many interesting currents, mainly among people of the Left, disillusioned people, they tend strongly toward Buddhism. Buddhism is an intriguing alternative, unique in the West, but which is gaining a lot of strength, and which reconciles the atheism of the traditional Left with a spiritual search. We know that Buddhism is atheist in its original conception. So it is possible for someone who comes from the Left but who in practical life has had disappointments, for this person it is possible to go through a search for internal change without the need for gods, or without the need for heavens or hells. So in all this we see many geological layers of thought and spiritual search. And I think we should be very open without so much judging of people who are in these searches. The New Age, for example, is a huge current of spiritual search, but it's also multiple, there is no precise current of search in the New Age. For us, in short, everything that is spiritual search is good.

*Journalist: How can the New Age be interpreted from a humanist point of view?*

Silo: The New Age, from a humanist point of view ... it is absolutely possible, it exists in practice. Today there are Muslim humanists, Buddhist humanists, Christian humanists, of course. Of course there are atheist humanists. So why, out of all the spiritual currents, wouldn't there be New Age people who are humanists? A person doesn't have to make any change of clothing to be a humanist. As long as they are against discrimination, and for the equal rights and opportunities of human beings. Searching for a change not only internally but of the inhuman social structures as well. As long as they are giving towards their neighbor, interested and wanting to reach the hearts of others. As long as they are not interested in the results of their actions but rather in the valid action being carried out, then they are humanists. Why then couldn't a New Age person be humanist? That's what we think.

*Journalist: What are the activities of the Movement? Is there a synergy with associations and movements that deal with social issues?*

Silo: Yes, with social organizations there has at times been complementation. But we should also highlight the differences. Let's take the case of social organizations such as non-governmental organizations. These are humanitarian organizations, concerned with the welfare of people who have no resources. We have met NGOs in Latin America, Asia, Africa, etc. But we have conceptual differences with those humanitarian organizations. We propose the relationship with the most needy not in paternalist terms, where the one who receives, receives, and that's it. We propose the relationship with the most needy in humanist terms, not humanitarian. By doing this we stress the reciprocity of the action. If we carry out a literacy campaign in some place in Africa, we start the literacy campaign by asking the people who are going to learn to read and learn to write to commit to take to others what they have achieved. If we carry out a medical campaign somewhere, it's true, we bring the drugs from somewhere else, we bring doctors, but we also ask the local people to make a commitment to start a small clinic, to commit to collaborating with others in vaccination campaigns and things like that. In the literacy and social medicine campaigns that we have developed in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Bangladesh, and various places in Africa, the criteria we've always stressed is the criterion of reciprocity, and not that other form which can even be humiliating for people, in the sense that they simply receive. From our point of view there aren't valid active attitudes and others that are passive, but rather an interrelation of people where everyone helps each other and where we all grow at the same time. The ones carrying a certain message grow, the ones bringing medicine and education grow. The ones who receive that message also grow, and that ends up returning to us because they multiply that action with others. That's what matters to us: reciprocity in action, which is what matters first, and reciprocity. Solidarity, which today is so battered, has become a kind of receiving without giving. The reciprocity of interest is the one in which something is received in order to give something else in return.

*Journalist: Let's go back to the issue of religions. Are the principles of the Humanist Movement in opposition to those of organized religions?*

Silo: The principles of the Humanist Movement are hardly in opposition or clash with the ideals or principles of organized religions. The problem lies elsewhere. There is no clash of principles, there is a clash of procedures. When we find sectors within a particular religion which foster discrimination and foster violence and foster fundamentalism, there we will necessarily clash. But we don't believe that that is in their sacred books. We do not believe that it is in their fundamental principles. Those distortions, the racism, fundamentalism, discrimination of all kinds that appear in certain religions, are not due to those principles: they are due to the procedures of certain sectors, and with them, we will always have clashes.

*Journalist: A message that you would like to give to everyone, or a meaningful sentence you have written and would like everyone to hear and take into account.*

Silo: There is one phrase that is very dear to me, it has meaning for me personally, and I couldn't say whether it may be useful for others. In any case I will take a risk and say, "Love the reality you build, and not even death will halt your course."

*Journalist: Sometimes there are resistances when talking to people about the Humanist Movement. Why is it so difficult to get people to understand something so simple?*

Silo: These are issues of historical process. Just as certain words, certain gestures, certain musical forms, etc. become fashionable, certain currents also become the fashion. But of course our intention is not to put into a motion a fashion. Our intention is more consistent, more profound, and so that takes time, while other ideologies are falling, while other structures are falling, humanism is opening its way. What I can assure you is that, because of the loss of references that the world is experiencing today, from the collapse of traditional values, the collapse of entire social structures, the destruction of the nation State in favor of regionalization, because of all the elements of change that we know of, humanism is becoming increasingly understood and well received by people. Not everyone understands it at the start, but little by little everyone is tuning their antennae. That is a process, not a fashion. A fashion lasts five or six years, four years of life. A process is something longer, which develops and it is difficult to know how far it will go.

*Journalist: What are the prospects of the Movement for the immediate future?*

Silo: In the immediate future, the prospects of the Movement have to be frozen for about eight more months. Because there is going to be a very important world meeting in which we will consider the past 30 years of action, the situation of the past 30 years in the world, and that's where the line that we will carry forward into the future will be determined.

*Journalist: In Italy it seems that the Movement does not collaborate much with other associations who share some of its goals. Does this also happen in other countries or is it something related mainly to the Italian situation?*

Silo: Well, the relationship of the people of the Movement with people of other structures is very smooth, very easy here in Italy, as in other parts of the world. But we are talking about the relationship of people to people, and not of hierarchies to hierarchies. And so it could be that there is not much agreement or mutual cooperation with hierarchies. But at the social base, which is where the activists of the Humanist Movement work, specifically in neighborhoods, with their neighborhood newspapers, their meeting centres, their meetings in people's houses, with their direct social action, this relationship is an everyday thing. The direct relation of humanist activists with the activists of different groups or parties, whether these groups exist or are already gone; where those activists have been left unprotected and without reference, there the relationship is intense, it's daily and it's progressive. Anyway, since we're talking about Italy, we must take note of some events in which entire structures were involved in activities together with humanists. About two years ago, humanism led a great protest rally that ended in Rome with 50,000 participants, and in these marches and protests, against a law discriminating against foreign workers, various socialist groups also took part. There is a long list of collaborative actions, including in the political arena. Humanists at certain times have supported candidates or leftist groups during elections. But humanism is increasingly defining its own profile, so it is going less and less towards political and social groups, less and less towards the hierarchies and more and more to people at the grassroots. That is happening.

*Journalist: Thank you.*

Silo: To you.