

Humanism: Philosophy, Science or Religion?



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S. A. Ekanem

*Centre for General Studies, Cross River University of Technology
Calabar – Nigeria*

ABSTRACT

Man, unarguably has been taken to be the measure of all things and the determinant of what is and what is not. Man is also said to possess divine intelligence that transcends the physical. Man is seen by some as the creator, and so, man is a complex being that cannot understand him. Naturally, man is endowed with inquisitive instinct or spirit. This natural endowment has made man to always ask questions and attempt to provide answers to his several and unending questions. The quest to understand and completely comprehend the several mysteries surrounding him has led man to invent several epistemological approaches. These are aimed at actualizing himself in the world he finds himself, which he cannot adequately explain. This desire for rational explanation of the complex world and the several mysteries that include many has led man into the discovery of philosophy, science and religions as paradigms of explanation. These have further produced other ideas and concepts such as humanism, existentialism, pragmatism among others. Of all these, new ideas, humanism seems the most challenging and confusing as it contains several elements that could make it philosophic, scientific and religious. This is more compounding, as we now have such concepts or ideas as literary Humanism, Renaissance Humanism, cultural Humanism, philosophical Humanism, Religious Humanism, Christian Humanism, modern Humanism or scientific Humanism, secular Humanism among others. So, is humanism, a philosophy, science or religion? This is the question this paper seeks to provide some clarifications or answers to.

INTRODUCTION

Humanism is one contemporary concept that has defied distinct clarification to what it is, and what it is not. This has brought about confusion as to what humanism really is. To this end, there has been contention as to what constitute humanism. As a result many have described it as a philosophy, while others see it as a religion. To some still, humanism is neither a philosophy nor a religion but a science.

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Several reasons has been advanced by scholars and humanists themselves as to why, humanism is a philosophy, a science and a religion. These reasons identified some basic elements that make humanism to be described as a philosophy, a science and a religion. This has generated a great confusion about how best to describe humanism.

Following this, one could be tempted to argue that humanism possess tripartite characteristics that makes it identifiable with philosophy, science and religion. But what are these “tripartite characteristics”. Is humanism really a philosophy? Is it a religion or a blend of all three?

It is on the basis of this therefore, that this paper will make effort to critically analyse the concept of humanism so as to identify those elements that makes it philosophy if it is, or those ones that makes it a science or religion, or a combination of all.

However, to be able carry out the task effectively, it is pertinent that we define the key concepts discoverable in this discourse. This will assist to provide us with clarity of meaning and remove any for of ambiguity as to the meaning or use of these concepts. The basic concepts here therefore, are Humanism, Science and Religion.

DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

Humanism

As a concept, it is difficulty to provide accurate definition. This is because several ideas usually come to mind once the term humanism is mentioned. However, the Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language defines “Humanism” as any system or mode of thought or action in which human interest, values, or dignity predominate” (1989:691).

Following this definition therefore existentialism and Marxism could best be described as humanistic, and this revealed and confirmed the reason why Karl Marx is often described by many as “humanist “par excellence”.

Humanism is further taken to mean “...a down to earth philosophical movement that represents a turn toward the satisfaction of human needs, both material and spiritual, and the fulfillment of human potential, here and now” (Rast, 2006:1).

For Huxley, humanism is An outlook that places man and his concerns at the centre of interest” (2000:1).

To Ashby, “Humanism is an approach to life based on reason and our common humanity, recognizing that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone (2008:1).

This definitions are of empirical orientation and philosophical in nature but most humanists insist that humanism is religious as they tend to provide us a definition of religion. But this paper will inclines to the Huxleyian view but will add that the approach towards achieving this is highly philosophical.

Religion

Religion according to Huxley is “Essentially an attitude to the world as a whole”. Following this definition, Huxley opines that evolution for instance, could prove a powerful principle to coordinate men’s beliefs and hopes as in God was in the past (1).

This postulation, introduced religious element into humanism. Religion has also been defined and viewed as what one does with his leisure time. It is on the basis of this that some regard football as a religion and several other things.

However, religion will be taken here to mean as presented by Wikipedia “...a set of common beliefs and practices generally held by a group of people often codified as prayers, and religious laws... encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history and mythology, as well as personal faith and mystic experience” (2008:1).

Science

Science has been defined in a variety of ways. It is viewed as a systematized form of knowledge derivable from observation and experimentation.

Etymologically science is derived from the Latin word “scientia” which simply means knowledge, which is in the broadest sense. However, in a restricted sense, it refers to a system of knowledge that is acquired through knowledge based on the scientific method, which include the organized body of knowledge gained through such research.

Here, science will be taken to mean a systematic epistemological endeavour or activity by man towards the discovery and understanding of nature.

Having now understood the concepts of discourse, effort will be made to discover the nature of philosophy, science and religion in relation to humanism.

Philosophy and Humanism

Philosophy as we know it is said to be speculative, critical, rational and analytic in nature. It is also taken to be an activity, a product and a way of life (Etuk, 2003:4-7). Philosophy is also said to be an approach to life. And if humanism is also taken or view as an approach to life that is based on reason and our common humanity, recognising that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone (Ashby, 2008:1), then we could argue that humanism is philosophical.

Also, Ashby asserts that while atheism is just the absence of belief, humanism is a positive attitude to the world that is centred on human experience, and hopes. It is a strong notion that humanists believe that human experience and rational thinking provide the sole source of both knowledge and a moral code to live by.

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This portrays salient existential, epistemological and ethical tenets that are philosophical. This positions is further confirm by Emerson in his “The origins of Humanism”. Emerson posits that humanism originated in the West with the Greek philosopher Socrates, and in the East with the Chinese philosopher king Fu Tzu (Confucius) about 2,500 years go. For Socrates believed that in order to develop sound values people should be able to think for themselves. Kung Fu Tze on the other hand maintained that “A society ought to work for the benefit of all its members rather than be used merely as a pretext for the excesses of its rulers”; and that “virtue means to love one another” (2006:1). From this, we can discover the core beliefs of humanism which are:

People should be able or in a position to think for themselves, not just accepting blindly what they are told by figures of authority, who may have their own personal agenda, which is to enhance their wealth or power. These figures or authorities may be uninformed or confused.

Values are strictly based in the human persons. So for us to know whether a given course of conduct is meaningful or right, we have to question ourselves whether it promotes the maintenance or development of the normal capabilities of the human persons, like thinking, feeling and physical health (Strathem: 15 and 19). These beliefs of humanists have two basic philosophical implications, which are:

- People should not accept facts dogmatically but rather should be critical, rational and analytic toward values.
- People must establish values on the basis of sanctity and sacredness of humans life.

From this analysis, we discover that humanism is seriously against the idea of accepting any thing by faith. Indeed, to the humanists, there must be good evidence for beliefs, be it religious or otherwise. This position is the core and foundational tenet of rationalism, which sprout from epistemology that is the off-spring of philosophy.

From this, it could be reasoned that humanism just like existentialism is another philosophical world-view or product that attempts to place man in a better position to create a more condusive, enduring and peaceful world. It is a philosophical view point aim at establishing a brotherhood of mankind based on certain ethical premises or principles.

This position is graphically captured by Emerson when he posits that Humanism is an anti-authoritarian philosophy that emphasizes the importance of reason and the indispensability of both evidence and compassion for others in the formation of values Contemporary humanistic morality judges acts primarily on the basis of their effect upon other human begins. Humanists believe that the purposes of life are found in the meeting of human needs – intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, and in the fulfillment of human capabilities, mental and physical (2006:2).

This clearly shows the philosophical foundation of humanism. It establishes the fact that humanism is the application of certain philosophical tools towards creating a society that will cherish and respect human value

and dignity. Indeed, humanism is a blend of or a combination of ethics, existentialism, Marxism and rationalism.

Religion and Humanism

Religion characteristically is built or established on faith, rituals, prayers, and belief in God. Epistemologically, it could be argued and strongly too, that religious knowledge is basically dogmatic. Faith plays pivotal role in religion, and this is an unquestionable belief on the supernatural.

Humanism on the other hand finds itself in conflict with religious fundamentalist, especially over the issue of the separation of church and state. This is largely due to the fact that secular humanists tend to see religions as superstitious, regressive and closed minded, while religious fundamentalists regards secular humanism as a serious threat to the values that are enshrined or discovered in religious books such as the Bible and the Quar'an (Wikipedia, 2006:3).

The position by humanists that religion is "superstitious, regressive and closed minded", puts humanisms within the purview of philosophy and science. Despite this, some Christian fundamentalists hold on to the fact that secular humanism is a religion but humanists disagree sharply on this religious view point of humanism. It is therefore argued that certain varieties of humanism may be religious depending on the meaning or the sense of the word. Disagreements on this however, becomes mostly semantic.

Humanism basically denotes a range of world views, and some of these are taken to be religious while some are not. This position places humanism within the horns of dilemma.

This therefore created several varieties of humanism as earlier explained. Based on this, there is "Religious Humanism" that emerged out of ethical culture, unitarianism and universalism. So, the critical irony of modern humanism is the inability of those that advocate the idea to agree that this worldview is religious or not. But following the functional definition of religion as postulated by the humanists, one is inclined to accept the fact that humanism is a religion. For the humanists, religion "serves the personal and social needs of a group of people sharing the same philosophical world-view (Wikipedia, 2006:2).

This functional definition merged religion into the ever towering philosophical tentacles. So, critically viewed, humanism still finds itself within the "golden egg" of philosophy.

Humanism as a doctrine that strives towards serving the personal needs of the individual provides a basis for moral values, and inspiration to a set of ideas, methods that deals with life's harsher realities, a rationale for living a better and joyous life with sense of purpose for the benefit of humanity.

Humanism seeks to evolve an ethical culture in a world that is characterized by strives, political upheavals, religious bigotry; enemy and

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economic contradictions that tend to depersonalize and dehumanize the human person.

To achieve this, the humanists do not depend nor believe in any supernatural to salvage the human deplorable situations. It is not also faith in prayers, rituals and spiritual invocations that can bring about the desired human remedy. The solution to the humanists, lie in the power and ability of man to employ his reason positively towards finding a solution to his problem.

This assertion is notably supported by Phifer in his essay “The faith of a Humanist”, where he alludes:

Humanism teaches us that it is immoral to wait for God to act for us. We must act to stop the wars and the crimes and the brutality of this and future ages. We have powers of a remarkable kind. We have a high degree of freedom in choosing what we will do. Humanism tells us that whatever our philosophy of the universe may be, ultimately the responsibility for the kind of world in which we live rest with us (2006:3).

From this Phiferian stand point, we discover that humanism lacks faith and interest in the supernatural and theological, hence, the humanist Paul Kurtz declares that “Humanism cannot in any fair sense of the word apply to one who still believes in God as the source and creator of the universe” (1973:177). Corlises Lamout totally agrees when he says that “Humanism contends that instead of the gods creating the cosmos, the cosmos, in the individualized form of human beings giving rein to their imagination, created the gods” (1982:145).

These views further remove humanism from the ambit of religion and place it (humanism) in the large embryo of philosophy. This is because, philosophically, the humanists are said to be naturalists. The fact is that they believe that nature is all that exists the material world is all that exists. There is nothing like God, no spiritual dimension, no afterlife. Carl Sagan explained this better in his introduction to his “Cosmos Series” when he declares that “The universe is all that is or ever was or ever will be” (1980:4). Roy Wood Sellars agrees as he asserts that “humanism is naturalistic”, and “rejects the supernatural stance with its postulated creator – God and Cosmic Ruler” (1973:135).

The naturalistic belief of the humanists that makes humanism philosophical as stated above, also takes it to the realm of science.

Science and Humanism

Science as earlier stated is a systematized knowledge derivable from observation and experimentation. Science basically is empirical and defies any belief that is not empirically verifiable. It is also said to be a set of rules for finding the truth about a matter.

Historically, science is a culturally sustained search for empirical truth and is said to have started in the late middle Ages, after a thousand years of being steeped in the Biblical worldview. This freedom of science from the stronghold or chain of religion came basically with Kepler, Copernicus and

Galileo who started the development of the “empirical attitude”. This approach shifted the emphasis from the Aristotelian focus on reasoning from the “first principles”, which was imported by St. Thomas Aquinas into theology during the medieval epoch. This created the era of enslavement of philosophy by theology. With philosophy in temporary chain, science became stagnated and there was no progress in arts and science.

However, with the unfettered enterprise of philosophizing during the renaissance, science emerged to cater for the needs of man as a product of rigorous search for the “Urstuf”, that is the basic element or substance that make up the universe as started by Thales in the West.

This brought about a paradigm shift as can be seen in logical positivism – positive philosophy (science), empiricism and later naturalism as epistemological notions towards understanding the world as a human creation. By “naturalism” is meant the ability to explain events and phenomena without recourse to the supernatural and the divine. This really puts humanism in the mould of the scientific and takes it further away from the religious.

Furthermore, naturalism is taken to be a liberation from the dogmas of religion and the conservative social order that they served as an ideology, and as a total independence for scientific inquiry into the nature of the world and also into human nature (Malik 2008:3).

In recent time, naturalism has been redefined, which is now widely taken to mean, not just the rejection of supernatural explanations, but the acceptance of the basic idea that explanations of natural science suffice to explain all phenomena. Naturalism is reformulated as an all-embracing physicalism.

What this implies is that humanism is a natural and physical pattern of explaining the world, which is scientific. This makes humanism to be a scientific enterprise that seeks to introduce ethical culture into human activities as it seeks to explain the world and human nature.

Also, humanist’s beliefs in the realm of biology, which is closely, tied to both their atheistic theology, and naturalist philosophy makes humanism a scientific inquiry of unique kind. For if there is no supernatural, then life, which includes human life is purely the result of natural phenomena. Hence, humanism necessarily inclines towards evolution. This is the view of Julian Huxley who insists that “man ... his body, his mind and his soul were not supernaturally created but are products of evolution” (1988:194-195). Prominent humanists like Lamout, Sellars and Kurtz concur this.

Atheism makes humanists to adopt ethical relativism, which is the belief that no absolute moral code exists, and therefore man have to adjust his ethical standard in each situation depending entirely on his own judgement (1991:200). If God therefore does not exist, then he cannot establish an absolute moral code. This view is tacitly shares by Max Hocutt who is humanists as he maintains that human beings “may, and do make up their own rules ...Morality is not discovered, it is made.” (1950:137).

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From this, atheism, naturalism, evolution, and ethical relativism are elements that are very fundamental in humanism. With these basic elements discoverable in humanism, it transcends the scientific domain.

CONCLUSION

We have painstakingly analyzed the basic concepts of our discourse. The basic characteristics of the key idea as inherent here have been identified. These have been applied in comparative analysis to find a suitable framework for humanism. In doing this, it was discovered that humanism is in serious conflict with religion. This is because the basic tenets of humanism is against the basic pillars or anchor points of religion.

The basic tenets of humanism are:

- Need to test beliefs, which is not against dogmas, tradition and faith.
- Reasons, evidence, scientific method that shows commitment to critical reason, factual evidence and scientific mode of inquiry rather than reliance on faith and mysticism in seeking solutions to human problems.
- Fulfillment, growth, creativity, which are primary concern for both the individual and humankind in general.
- Search for truth that is, a constant search for objective truth couple with understanding that new knowledge and experience do alter our imperfect perception of it.
- This life, which is a concern for a commitment to making it meaningful through proper understanding of our selves, our history, our intellectual and artistic achievements, and the outlook of those that differ from us.
- Ethics, that is a search for viable individual, social and political principles of ethical conduct, judging them on the Parameter to enhance human well-being and individual responsibility.
- Building a better world, which the conviction that with reason, an open marketplace of ideas, good will, and tolerance, progress can be achieved in building a better world for ourselves and children.

Also, most humanists agree and share the ideas that:

- There are no supernatural beings.
- The material universe is the only thing that exists.
- Science provides the only reliable source of knowledge about this universe.
- We only live this life, that is, there is no after life and such thing like reincarnation.
- Human beings can live ethical and fulfilling lives without religious beliefs.
- Human beings desire their moral code from the lessons of history, personal experience and thought.

A cursory or critical look into these humanistic tenets and ideas reveal that humanism though craves for ethical culture and values but does not fall within the religious pole. For the pillars that hold religion are all fallen by humanists' epistemological bulldozers. Hayden employed the pragmatic test to buttress this assertion, when he declares:

What the gods have been expected to do, and have failed to do through the ages, man must find courage and intelligence to do for him. More needful than faith in God is faith that man can give love, justice, peace and his entire beloved moral values embodiment in human relations... (2006:1).

Indeed, there cannot be a religion without the belief in the supernatural – God. So, within this logical premise, humanism is not a religion. For in humanism, faith in gods or in cosmic power is not required. What is needed is human reason to dictate through his knowledge and experience what moral values are. This anchors on the fact that morality is basically a group affair. It is a term for the customs that have grown up through generations, and are internalized by each new born individual in his term, much as he breathes the air that gives him life. So, to be moral, there is no need for a supernatural sanction of a “heavenly” policeman or judge. Morality must justify itself by actually working in human life. It is basically a social product, a historical achievement of social intercourse. With this historical, logical and analytic background, humanism can be said not to be a religion but a philo-scientific doctrines towards life.

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