

HUMANISM AND RELIGION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Humanism as an ideology, movement or philosophy is founded upon the belief that man is at the centre of the universe and is his own 'god'. Hence, he does not need further belief in the transcendental or supernatural in order to make sense of his existence. He is the architect of his destiny and he determines the outcome of his existence. Religion on the other hand holds and promotes the belief and worship of a deity or God who is seen as the creator and controller of man, the universe and everything in it. This paper aims at reconciling these extreme positions in order to elucidate the ideal truth of each. It adopts the method of critical analysis of each concept with the findings that humanism can pass as a religion too with man as its deity but cannot take the place of religion with God as the Supreme Being.

Keywords: Humanism, God, transcendental, Being, Religion, Destiny, Universe,

Introduction

The term humanism has been used to describe or designate quite a number of things. For instance, it is a term given to a view which bases its values on human welfare, and does not consider that religious dogmas are essential to moral beliefs or education. The term has also been used to describe the revival of classical studies at the time of the Renaissance as opposed to the exclusive emphasis on theological or ecclesiastical learning. Humanism can also be seen as the term of the society in a new and better direction (Idang, 30). Humanism is subject to a wide diversity of expression; but it is basically a philosophical outlook which is centered on the autonomy of man as a dignified being who is thought of as possessing within himself the source of truth and right. It proceeds from the assumption that man is on his own that this life is all there is.

Religion on the other hand, is a universal phenomenon. From the very beginning of time religion can be accepted as a legitimate and necessary activity of human race. According to Udo (207-208), religion is an ultimate fact of human nature, and the correct premise from which to begin is the fact of God thus, it is the whole person that is involved in religion, and not just any one department of his

life. It is the essence by which God as spirit and man's essential self-communicate. Religion is a phenomenon resulting from the relationship which existed from the beginning of life between God and man whom he created for Himself. Religion is such a prominent feature in human society that cannot be simply ignored. It is as old as man on earth and will, in all probability, remain on earth for as long as man remains in it.

It is perhaps for this striking and interesting phenomenon in religion especially in human life, diehard atheists, committed antagonists, or skeptics cannot ignore it. To this end, Omoregbe avers that "there is no other phenomenon which moulds and controls man's life as much as religion does. Man has given up not only beliefs; even renounce wealth and other valuable things of life like families and wives (xii). It is from this premise that the goal of this study seeks to beam its searchlight on the concept of humanism and that of religion as well as enquire the truth about them.

What is Humanism?

Like any other philosophical matter, humanism has no standard definition. But to claim indefinability of the term would seem to be an unproductive approach. At any level, one would discover that humanism has lots of influence in man's attempt to find meaning in the entire universe. To Etuk (5), humanism is "one of the major systematic philosophies in the history of civilization". The reason for calling it a systematic philosophy is that humanism claims to promote a correct and integrated view of human place in the universe. This is because humanism focuses on man's existential reality or lived experience. Humanism looks to man to solving his problems and not to some transcendental being or reality. This makes humanism more pragmatic. According to Idang, humanism may be seen as a devotion to human interest or as a system that is concerned with human (not divine) interest with the human race (31). Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yol, sees humanism as an American movement of thought that entails the attitude that emphasized the dignity of human beings ascribing a fundamental set of human values to them (313).

Frilov (178), considers human as "a system of views based on respect for the dignity and right of man, his value as a personality, concern for his welfare, his all-around development, and the creation of favourable conditions for social life". To Lamont, humanism is "a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity in this natural world and advocating the methods of

reason, science and democracy". This implies that humanism is not just a way of thinking but a credo, to use Lamont's terminology, for people who seek to lead happy and useful lives, making room for the various aspect of human nature. Humanism therefore can be summarized as a philosophy or ideology that places man at the centre of the universe. Man also becomes the architect his destiny working out means of him survival without any outside (transcendental) interference or assistance.

What is Religion?

Religion is one of those terms which are easy to use but difficult to define. It seems to be one of those 'portmanteau' (having multiple meanings) expression into which one can put anything one likes. Most definitions of religion stresses one aspects or another of religion to the exclusion of others. Of course, one could hardly expect to get an adequate statement of the complex nature of a phenomenon as religion, essentially involving all forms of human life. In the words of Etim, "the polemic nature of religion is evident in the countless number of wars and demonstrations in the name of religion". Religion indeed to him is capable of igniting feud with unimagined magnitude and unforeseen but disastrous consequences. The problems do not seem to be caused by religion *per se* but can be attributable to the naivety, over zealousness and exuberance of religious adherents, who have turned themselves into "zombies" of religion, acting mostly out of sentiments and ignorance (iv). The word 'religion' derives from three Latin word as its root, namely: i. 'ligare' meaning 'to bind'. ii. 'religare' meaning 'to unite', 'to link together'. iii. 'religio' meaning 'relationship'.

The etymologies of the word 'religion' therefore shows that religion is essentially a relationship -a link established between two persons namely, a human person and a divine person believed to exist. Accordingly, Udo (2009) sees religion as an encounter between man and a transcendent deity conceived as a personal being capable of communication with man. Alfred North Whitehead regards religion as an act and the theory of the internal life of man so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things (16). William James sees religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in their solitude in relations to whatever they may consider as the divine (50). Schleiermacher (125), defines religion as "a feeling of absolute dependence". Alan Mensies as cited in Schleiermacher, sees "religion as the worship of higher powers from the sense of need" (125). Bolaji Idowu defines religion as "the means by which God as spirit and man's essential self-communicate" (201). Religion can then be

summarized to be a relationship between mortality and immortality, man and the divine, immanence and transcendental. It can involve rituals, creed and sacred text. But most importantly, it has to do with man who is seen as a creature of a Supreme Being and how they both relate acceptably by the precepts of the Supreme Being. Let us now go into the central discussion of humanism and religion by posing two important questions.

Man without God?

In an attempt to give an answer to the sub-head above, it is germane to look at the origin of religion from the theory of anthropology. The anthropological theory based on its etymological derivation from the Greek word, *anthropos* meaning "man" traces the origin of religion and religious sentiment to man's projection. The theory is linked with the person of Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach who in *The Essence of Christianity* gave a naturalistic interpretation of religion based on the nature of man. Religion for him constituted the earliest and indirect form of self-knowledge. A child, of course is conscious of himself through another man (Etim, 13). In corollary, consciousness of the knowledge of God is simply the consciousness of man's projected self. This means that man can know God through the discovery of his own self via consciousness through reflection, introspection and contemplation. This is different from solipsism in the sense that in solipsism it is only the conscious self that is held to be the only pervading reality. In Feuerbach's words,

When religious consciousness of God is designated as self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of his identity; for, on the contrary, ignorance of it is fundamental to the peculiar nature of religion. To prelude this misconception, it is better to say religion is man's earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge. Man, first of all sees his nature as if out of himself, before he finds it is himself. His nature is, in the first instance, contemplated by him as that of another being (13).

Feuerbach argues that man in his finitude yearns for qualities like goodness, justice, power, wisdom and mercy in its absoluteness which he cannot realize hence, conceive or creates an imaginary being to whom man projects these qualities but devoid of its human limitations. This projection of course, satisfies the inner yearnings of man for a perfect being. This idea is also implicit in

Santayana's objection of the use of the name "God" as a name of a transcendental supernatural being. For him, God was the perfect symbols of the human ideal truth, beauty and goodness. In essence, the different gods of religion symbolizes different human ideals. For instance, Ahura Mazda symbolizes that of goodness, Zeus that of power and Yahweh that of Justice, whereas, the God of the great monotheistic religion symbolizes the unified ideal of perfection. The study however tends to disagree with Feuerbach in the sense that man isn't powerful enough to create a God as the Supreme Being because of man finitude. So man couldn't have created God.

What man worships then as God according to Feuerbach is a hypothetical being, an idealized created image of man; therefore, nothing but "Wunschwesen, (a wish being). God is, therefore, a personalized wish of man. Man, of course, could not have an idea of an infinite God as a finite being. Therefore, God conceived as an infinite being is, however, man's collective projected nature. Man then prays to himself by praying to God. Feuerbach further reasons that man's collective projected creation of this imagery of God satisfies some of man's desires in a way. For instance, "providence is the desire to believe we are important; the experience of God as personal is to say that personality is the highest form of being, prayer is our desire to converse with ourselves; while miracle, though, is the very heart of faith satisfies the wishes of men in the most desirable way" (129).

By extension, man loves miracle because in it he gets what he wishes right away without any tiresome waiting. In essence, religion is man's mistaken effort to project himself as infinite upon the Universe. The religious error then is for man to mistake his own nature for external reality. This inevitably results in the alienation of man from his essence and his best qualities thus reducing him to nothing. The realization of this fact is to overcome the alienation of man by stopping the worship of God. Miracles however are the handiwork of God. Even Hume accepts the truth that miracles are a violation of known natural laws. God who puts these transcendental laws in place can also violate them if he so wishes.

Feuerbach analogy appears to be self-defeating, because man cannot live without God. His position is anchored on the fact that a finite man cannot have knowledge of a transcendent infinite God or perceives his essential qualities of goodness, truth and beauty which Feuerbach attributes to man's projection. Feuerbach seems to lose sight of the fact that perception of such projected

universal attributes requires some kind of abstraction beyond the finite man. If man could then intuit such collective projected attributes, then it is equally possible to intuit the essence of infinite analogously through the effects. Feuerbach's reservation culminated in skepticism about the capacity of man and led him inevitably to a gross idolatry of Man. But essentially, man cannot seem to do without God or the idea of him. A finite man on his own may not be able to have knowledge of a transcendental infinite God which is why this infinite God has been visiting man like we see in many religions including Christianity and Judaism.

God without Man?

The ontological argument stipulates that the existence of God follows necessarily from the idea of God, since God is a being than which a greater cannot be conceived. Analytically, this statement can better be appreciated through the power of thought or logic. For Anselm, to think is to think of something that exists since it is not possible to think of nothing. To think is to think being. In the case of God, to even ask the question of its existence is to posit its existence since such question is only possible because he exists. In the case of Zeus, he is not actually God by so many criteria He is at best a mythological created character.

Descartes formulation held that the idea of God who is infinite and perfect, could not be provoked by any finite objects and must therefore, be caused by God Himself. Secondly, from the cosmological argument, Aquinas argues that man, as a finite being cannot know God's existence directly but indirectly through his effects in the world. The world for him exhibits causality, motion, contingency, graduation and design (67). In the world, nothing happens without cause and there is no motion without something causing the thing to move or to stop, if it is already in motion. Without God, the issues of causality and motion, for instance, would have proceeded *ad infinitum*. That is, things will continue to be caused (generated) or be in motion *ad infinitum*, that is until man can no longer understand. God then is seen as the prime mover or the ultimate cause of the universe. In fact, to argue this is very simple, because without the cause of God for man to exist, man would not have existed. But God as the first cause must itself be necessarily uncaused and self-existent, that is the uncaused cause.

Also, to further elucidate on the point of God's existence without man, it is believed that African religious concept is anchored on African cosmological concept. The Africans believe in a dualistic universe (the physical world and the

spiritual world). The spiritual world is the abode of the supreme deity while the physical world is the abode of man. The entire universe is however integrative with both the visible and invisible beings interacting. The world is however, full of spirits since the spirit world is situated neither in the sky nor beneath the earth; but side by side with the abode of the living men, from whom the dead are separated by fence, impassible to ordinary mortals. The thrust of the above view is that, the idea of spirit as the Supreme Being in the African context, signal the belief that there is an existence that exists, independent of man. The existence of God seems not to require man. For Patrick Okure (92), the idea of a fence is metaphysical, meant to express the invisibility of the spirit world which is a further belief of the supreme existence of God without Man.

Evaluation

What is obvious from the above exposition is the fact that religion is a complex phenomenon which no one reality can completely exhausts its profundity. Human search for the divine takes divergent dimensions and approaches which calls for caution and closer study when evaluating them. The oriental religions which predated western religions were more philosophical, metaphysical and ethical. Though, they made no recourse to a particular god or deity yet emphasizes asceticism that far surpassed that of contemporary religions: The absent of a personal deity religion and the idea of revelation of deity was not yet known until Judaism (Etim, 38).

Humanism as a philosophy denies the existence of God as a blend of atheistic positions, just like atheists asked: who is God? What kind of God? If any exist?. A humanist as well as a foremost existentialists, opines that, "man's existence precedes his essence". This means, man must first exist before he becomes what he wants to becomes. Man is endowed naturally with abundant of possibilities, which can be appropriated. For Sartre, man is absolutely free, he cannot but be free, he is condemned to be free and nothing can limit man's is freedom. The existence of God then poses a problem to man's freedom. For the freedom of man to be realizable, then the issue of God's existence should not be contemplated.

It is in fact, from this view that Protagoras remarks thus: "man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not" (28). This assertion to the humanists may be true, but the practical realization of this view in the real world is self-defeating. Because we definitely

know that man is not the measure of all things. Man cannot do all things, unlike God. The point is who in doing the knowing? Knowledge is possible where man or a God is involved. This underscores the position of Etuk in his *New Humanism*. Nietzsche regards' God as dead. The death of God to him means man's liberation. God was the oppressor of man, an enemy of man's progress who imposed the 'slave morality' on man. His death is therefore good news to man. However, the death of god is also negatively felt. It creates a vacuum in man's being. It has made human life meaningless and purposeless (Nietzsche, 196).

Nietzsche described the death of God in a dramatic way in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In the episode, a man was seen carrying a lantern and going around the market in search of God in broad day light. Since God could not be found even in such a crowded place, Nietzsche proclaimed God as dead. The death of God was liberating enough in that it afforded man the unfettered freedom to excel (198). Scholars over time on this view, have often stated that the mere idea of God by Nietzsche signals the existence of God, which inevitably rendered his notion of God's death weak. According to John (528), Nietzsche's philosophy when it is not properly checked can be said to be a conscious attempt to foredoom the product of creation namely: humanity. Hence, with a combined audacity, boldness and deficiency, Nietzsche's declares "every created God in turn creates a devil for himself" (Morgan, 164).

The ancient philosophers sees man as a rational animal because they knew that while man shared his biological functions with the lower animals, he alone in the animal kingdom had a share in the rationality of the universe. Different other images of man have been held up, only for them to collapse. Thus, man as a sexual being, as an economic being, as pawn in the universe, is haunted by the sense of helplessness and futility. None of these views is guaranteed to either explain the phenomenon of man, or give man any lasting satisfaction. And Against these divergent views of man, the new humanism which is of the Christian view of man maintains that man is a creature of God; made in his image, and that image uniquely defines man; for man would not be man without it.

Conclusion

In this work, effort is made to reconcile the contradictory implications of humanism and religion, especially in evaluating the basic levels which are fundamental. The dignity of man as said Etuk is conferred on man by the one

who created man in his own image, and that to discount this factor is in fact, to de-value man. The bold truth here is that, the dignity of man is not derived; nor can one man confer value upon another. But both man's value and his dignity are conferred upon man by the one who created man. Also, an attempt to describe the nature of God may be difficult, because of the purity of man's language or because of his nature. Therefore, we may accept Kant's submission that God is incomprehensible to man's reason because he belongs to the realm of the *noumena*. On the other hand, we can accept Gabriel Marcel's position that being is a mystery to be appreciated and not a problem to be solved. Man is a product of religion, which clearly attests to the fact that the Supreme Being God, created man and man's attempt at knowing God, necessitated religion which humanism cannot jettison.

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