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## INVESTIGATING THE CASE OF RELIGION AND HUMANISM

### Introduction

The humanist, though in a sense on the right track, has not found the right object.<sup>1</sup>

Men are caught between two worlds – one appeals to their biological, sensual nature, to their need for love and recognition; the other lifts them out of self, draws them to a search for identity and purpose, inspires a creativity that reaffirms that which is unique in human experience. Humanism, a philosophy which recognizes the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things or takes the human nature as its theme, is devoted to exposition of the above dilemma. It also explores through several means, the human endeavour to reconcile the demands of personal gratification with the need to discover and achieve a distinguishing quality of manhood, endowing it with a sense of purpose.<sup>2</sup>

### The Pre-Occupation of Humanism and What Humanists Believe

One of the major themes of humanism is freedom, the exaltation of freedom. Philosophers like Pico della Mirandola extols the freedom of the human spirits in concepts drawn from Platonism. He exalts man's capacity to form his world, vary it and better it absolutely. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, he expressed this faith in man as the power given to Adam, man, by God to "control his destiny."<sup>3</sup> God said to man, according to Pico:

1. Geddes MacGregor: *Introduction to Religious Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 79.
2. Alan R. Taylor: "Zionism and Jewish Humanism" in *Christian Century: An Ecumenical Weekly* Sept. 18, 1968, p. 1164.
3. Meagher, P. K. (et al eds.) *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Religion* (Washington D. C., Corpus Publication, 1966), p. 1734.

I have given you, Adam, neither a predetermined place nor a particular place nor a particular aspect nor special prerogatives in order that you may take and possess these through your own decision and choice. The limitations on the nature of other creatures are contained within my prescribed laws. You shall determine your own nature without constraint from any barrier, by means of the freedom to whose power I have entrusted you. I have placed you at the centre of the world so that from that point you might see better what is in the world. I have made you neither mortal nor immortal so that like a free and sovereign artificer, you might mould and fashion yourself into that form you yourself shall have chosen.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, man has been given an unlimited nature, the power to do and undo; the power to choose and fashion his destiny. Thus if religion is commitment to a kind of life that purports to recognize a source beyond itself, then humanism asserts that man has come of age and does not need any father-figure, God, or any intervention or interference in organizing this life. Humanism, therefore, stresses the dignity and worth of human beings and their capacity for self realization through reason. It represents a belief in the importance of man, a confidence in his powers of reason and a conviction that man is capable of moral greatness. Thus it "opposes the traditional pre-occupation with original sin, predestination and general human Incompetence."<sup>5</sup>

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) expresses this more clearly when he said: "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself . . . not in himself as an individual but in his essential nature, his species."<sup>6</sup> Or, as Geddes MacGregor succinctly puts it, "the source of religion lies somewhere in mankind itself."<sup>7</sup> While Charles Potter, assuming that the universe has a meaning which man could discover within the range of experience alone and without any supernatural presupposition, defines his position

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4. Paul Edwards (ed.): *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Vols. 3 & 4) (New York : Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1967). pp. 49ff.

5. Donald A. Wells : *God, Man, and the Thinker* (New York : Random House, 1962), p. 343.

6. Quoted by Geddes MacGregor. *op cit*, p. 70.

7. *Ibid* ; p. 4.

as "faith in the supreme value and self perfectibility of human personality."<sup>8</sup> These imply that man can do almost everything for himself to the point of even redeeming himself. But whereas man has been able to solve, in a way, his economic, political and social problems; it remains to be seen whether he can solve his religious problems.

### The Ground of Humanism

There is nothing very strange about the humanist's idea. It is an accepted truth that man is the architect of his own fortune, that as a man makes his bed so he lies on it. Man has been able to bring greater areas of nature under his control through his character and intelligence. After all, did God not make man the Lord and climax of his creation giving him the authority to "subdue the earth" ? (Gen. 1 : 28 ). And according to the Genesis account, God gave man the onerous task of naming all other animals (Gen. 2: 19-20). Indeed, compared to other animals, man's keenest rivals are so far behind him in the qualities needed for the leadership he enjoys that it is not difficult for man to outwit them even in circumstances unfavourable to him. And it is easy for him, in other circumstances, to achieve almost total control over them. why?

St. Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians described human beings as "Co-workers with God" ( 2 Cor. 6:1). This implies that even if man did not participate in the creation, he is heavily involved in the ordering of the world. And man has since remained a great achiever. He has achieved much in the fields of Science and Technology – he has invented the computer that talks and does practically everything, and man has enhanced production in industries by the use of robots. He has also broken the barriers of time and space. The things that were humanly impossible a century ago are possible with man today. Considering all these, it is easy for anybody who appreciates human potentialities to be sympathetic to humanism. Most Christians would be sympathetic too in the sense that they agree that human values are important. The first Epistle of St. John, for instance, reminds us that since nobody has seen God with physical eyes, it would be a good idea, if he wanted to love God, to begin with the man next door whom he has seen (1Jn. 4:20). For "ye are Gods" (Psalm 82:6).

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8. Charles Porter : *Humanism a New Religion* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1930), p. 1391.

In spite of all these achievements and glory, has man indeed become self-sufficient? Is he truly the "Lord of all"? Humanists have claimed that their ideas, as far as reason could warrant, were adequate for man.<sup>9</sup> But Christians who believe in the Biblical God would totally repudiate the presuppositions of humanism together with the notion that humanity can save itself.<sup>10</sup> This is because according to Reinhold Niebuhr, "Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence. His essence is true self determination but his sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction."<sup>11</sup> This has blocked his path to fulfilment and his ambition becomes a mere mirage. Therefore, real progress toward the essential betterment of humanity could be attained only by reconciliation to *The Other* that is beyond humanity and the *Source* of whatever good humanity can ever hope to achieve. Man, therefore, cannot save himself, and is not self sufficient.

### The Mystery of Human Personality

There is no doubt that man's superiority to other animals in intelligence and skill is very striking. Yet the question remains: Does man's high development imply his unaided control of the Universe? Almost everybody believes that all things on earth should be related to man as their centre and crown. As a result man has expressed many divergent and even contradictory opinions about himself!! Sometimes he exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things and sometimes debases himself to the point of absolute despair.<sup>12</sup> Therefore the place of man in the universe is not a question of whether man is great or small, the paradox is that he is both.

Alexis Carrel in his book, *Man the Unknown* discusses this from a scientific standpoint and says among other things:

Man is gigantic in comparison with an electron, an atom, a molecule, a microbe. But when compared with a mountain or with the earth, he is tiny.<sup>13</sup>

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9. Donald A. Wells : *op cit.* p. 353.
  10. Geddes MacGregor : *op. cit.* p. 77.
  11. Reinhold Niebuhr "Man as a Problem to Himself" in Hartsock D. E. (ed.) *Contemporary Religious Issues* (Belmont California : Wadsworth Publishing Co. Inc., 1968), p. 64.
  12. Pope Paul VI : "The Dignity of the Human Person" in Hartsock D. E. (ed.) *op. cit.* p. 101.
  13. Alexis Carrel : *Man the Unknown* (London : Harper and Bros, 1935), pp. 60 - 61.

But man is not only both great and small, he is also both good and wicked. He is, therefore, split within himself and as a result all of human life, whether collective or individual, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, and between light and darkness.

In the human nature, man is a puzzle so much so that it becomes impossible to imagine how he could ever hope to understand his own nature as he understands other components of universe that confronts him. For instance, man cannot live without answering the question: "What am I?"<sup>14</sup> The answers to this question may be many-sided since man plays many different roles. He may at the same time be a Nigerian, a Baptist, a father, a teacher and a farmer. Each of these corresponds to a particular aspect of his life. But the answer cannot be "I am a human being" for the human identity is latent in mankind and is not associated with any clearly identifiable behaviour or organizational structure like "I am a father" implies that he is involved in family affairs. However, this inability of man to fully understand himself is a pointer to the existence of God. Geddes MacGregor puts it clearly thus: "Our nature is such as to suggest that the key to an understanding of it lies not in ourselves but beyond ourselves."<sup>15</sup> It is only in man's relationship to God that we find "the key to an understanding of the mystery of man."<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, man knows that by his intellect he surpasses the material world. Indeed by employing his talents effectively man attained great heights in the practical sciences and in technology. Yet he cannot control his inventions. He is increasingly afraid that his own technological progress with, say, bombs, coupled with his relatively retarded moral and social development, may cause him to obliterate himself by an explosion of his own making.<sup>17</sup> And in the face of death, the riddle of man's existence becomes more pathetic. His fear of pain and age is nothing to be compared with his dread of perpetual extinction. What man can do with nuclear energy is fascinating but his helplessness in the face of an unsplit atom is alarming. Hence Nicholas Berdyaev says "Where there

14. Kenneth E. Boulding: "The Wisdom of Man and the Wisdom of God" in Hartsock D. E. (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 126 f:

15. Geddes MacGregor. *op. cit.*, p. 150.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

is no God, there is no man,"<sup>18</sup> meaning that the values traditionally associated with man are lost when he is taken out of relation with God.

So Pascal was right when he spoke of man's greatness and wretchedness. Man is magnificent, but pathetic; wonderful, but ridiculous; great, but miserable. There is no limit to either his grandeur or his folly. His values are indeed great but their greatness is precarious and anything other than independent. Man appears to be the bearer of values which he, far from creating, is not even very good at sustaining.

From all these, we realize that human nature, whatever it is, is much too complex to be accounted for or even discussed in terms only of itself. Man's freedom has been damaged by sin and so the basic source of man's dignity lies in man's call to communion with God and his "unconditional loyalty to God alone." "This doctrine," says Kenneth E. Boulding, "must be continually refreshed, re-interpreted and rediscovered and it is one of utmost importance for mankind in the critical days which lie ahead."<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Realizing all that man has been able to achieve and his unique position in the universe, it might be asked whether it still makes sense to believe in God today? Although many humanists believe that God is functionless and diversionary, humanism as a philosophy, for all its antipathy toward theology has not an anti-religion or anti-Christian character. But its determination to defend the value or freedom of man makes it stand against and reject the conception of God as a sort of powerful reinforcement of our material, racial or class prejudices. This is because many honest men and women assume that the word "God" refers to a tyrannical or racial deity.

Gone are the days when theology spoke with a great deal of confidence about God. Today, the modern man, in the midst of a revolution in his perception of reality and his understanding of himself, no longer understands the language of traditional religion. Therefore, if religion is to address man squarely in the particularity of his existence, it must develop a new language and employ the vocabulary of change.

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18. Nicholas Berdyaev: *The End of Our Time*. translated by Donald Atwater (London: Sheed and Ward, 1933) p. 80.

19. Kenneth E. Boulding: *op. cit.*, p. 127.

Nevertheless, St. Paul rightly describes man as a "co-worker with God." Since God works through the instrumentality of human beings. Indeed, it has been said that "without man God cannot and without God man will not." Therefore, in the words of T.C. O'Brien:

. . . this world view opposes a humanism that would make man absolute to the exclusion of God and his grace and opposes any purely superterrestrial interpretation of the Christian message that would negate human culture, tradition and values.<sup>20</sup>

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20. O'Brien, T. C. : "Christian Humanism" in *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Religion* edited by P. K. Meagher et al. *op. cit.*, p. 1734.