CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACE BUILDING: THE HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the humanist claims to conflict resolution and peace building. The core question it seeks to answer is whether humanism can engender a peaceful world devoid of conflict as claimed by humanists. As such it attempts to discover the manner in which humanism can engender a world devoid of conflict and violence. Given the internal constitution of humanism as an ideology, and following a thorough analysis of the practice of humanism in history, the paper argues that humanism is open to the pitfalls of religion which it criticises. The noticeable similarity between religion and humanism entails that humanism will therefore lead to the same type of violence and conflict associated with religion. Consequently, the paper concludes that the claim that humanism will engender a peaceful world devoid of conflict is utopian.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Peace Building, Humanist, Ideology, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK) recorded 385 conflicts globally in 2017. A total of 222 of these conflicts were violent while 163 were non-violent conflict situations (HIIK, 2018). Conflicts situations may involve loss of life, stunted social and economic developments, promotion of injustice, and entrenchment of social inequality (Grandvoinnet and Schneider, 1998; Olsen, 2009). Individually and collectively, states have continued to search for solutions to conflict situations. The United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping is the common tool which global leaders deploy in conflict management around the world and it comprises capable personnel drawn from the military, police and civilians. The UN peacekeeping operations rest on the following instruments: charter of the United Nations, human rights, international humanitarian law, and Security Council mandates (UN, 2008).

Peacekeeping personnel as conflict management agents have been known to engage in unethical practices that call into question the motives of the entire peacekeeping process in which they were involved. Welch (2014, 62) may have had the field experiences of state and international conflict management actors in mind when she writes that "Even our commitment to justice and peace through the exercise of skilful means may lead in directions and result in consequences we can neither predict nor control." Thus, recent peacekeeping activities around the world have led to allegations of unethical practices levelled against peacekeepers. For instance, Nigeria's national peacekeeping operators comprising soldiers and the joint civilian task force deployed in the North Eastern part of the country as a result of insurgent Boko Haram group were accused of complicating the conflict situation by engaging in the same acts as Boko Haram. Thus, while Boko Haram insurgents were accused by Amnesty International of raping kidnapped women and girls, soldiers and civilian joint task force rape and sexually abuse women IDPs (Amnesty International, 2018).

Conflict management efforts are also complicated by carefully intended actions resulting from conflict of interests by international communities involved in peacekeeping operations. The European Union (EU) presents a handy example here. In 1997, the EU in the

wake of Rwandan Genocide expressed its concern on the need to forestall similar occurrence in Africa. Consequently, it issued a position that conflict management in Africa was its priority (Landgraf, 1998). This position was reinforced ten years after, during the EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon, where it was agreed that peace and security were the fulcra of EU-Africa joint partnership. An assessment of EU conflict management efforts in Africa shows that the entire EU conflict management projects in Africa were informed first of all by European interests like migration and terrorism control (Olsen, 2009).

The argument is that these states of affairs run counter to the norms of equality, humanitarianism and human flourishing that ought to inform every conflict management effort. Thus, instead of subsiding, conflict situations multiply around the globe. As a counterpoise, humanist thinkers have projected humanism as an ethical disposition with innately imbued capacity for effective conflict management and ensuring human flourishing. Humanists point at centuries of opposition to cruelty and violence associated to humanism and hold that it has the key to conflict management. For instance, they argue that:

> A humanistic sensibility impelled the Enlightenment thinkers to condemn not just religious violence but also the secular cruelties of their age, including slavery, despotism, executions for frivolous offenses such as shoplifting and poaching, and sadistic punishments such as flogging, amputation, impalement, disembowelment, breaking on the wheel, and burning at the stake. The Enlightenment is sometimes called the Humanitarian Revolution, because it led to the abolition of barbaric practices that had been commonplace across civilizations for millennia (Pinker, 2018: 10-11).

The above humanistic claims are not supported by history. Some prominent humanists of the era of slavery were known to have owned slaves. John Locke, a famous humanist philosopher of the time is a good example here as he was said to have owned stock in slave trading companies and was Secretary of the Lord Proprietor of the Carolinas where slavery was being practiced while at the same time preaching humanist ideals. Thus, there is a historical tension, a disconnect between theory and practice. It is in the light of this that the paper examines the humanist claims to conflict resolution and promotion of global peace.

Understanding Humanism

The term humanism did not exist until the nineteenth century (Copson, 2015). However, humanist scholars have been able to demonstrate that sentiments and dispositions that are descriptive of the term have been recurring in all epochs of recorded history. The Sophist, Protagoras, was attributed with the earliest rendition of the content of what would later be known as humanism. Since the emergence of the word, the meaning given to it has varied and scholars often disagree on whether to describe it as a worldview or life-stance. This confusion is particularly manifest in the varied definitions of the term given by the American Humanist Association, who as of 2012, defined humanism as: "**a progressive philosophy of life** that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good of humanity" (Ardiente and Speckhardt, 2014: 120-121). However, the current definition of humanism in the Association's website renders it as "**a progressive lifestance** that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity." (American Humanist Association, accessed May 2018). Thus, the confusion as whether humanism is a worldview, a philosophy or a lifestance is one which humanists still grapple with. The discrepancy in the definition could be interpreted to represent the emphasis of particular leaderships at different times. It could also be used to justify the humanist's claim to fluidity of ideas and meanings.

In order to escape from the controversy associated with defining the term, a number of scholars prefer to identify the characteristics of humanism rather than giving a full-blown definition of it. This is the path toed by Law (2011) who listed the following seven characteristics as belonging to humanism; belief in science and reason as guide to human action, atheistic or agnostic disposition, non-belief in afterlife, human-centric ethics, individual moral autonomy, man rather than God as maker of life-meaning, and secularism in the sense of state being neutral to religion. Despite some claims by some religious people to humanism (this claim has given rise to terms such as Catholic humanism, protestant

humanism, Christian humanism, Islamic humanism, and so on), contemporary humanists claim that a constant thread in the characterisation of humanism anywhere is the sense of godlessness (Hutchinson, 2014), abhorrence or hatred of God (Driscoll, 2017). It is this kind of understanding that informed the production of assorted labels for individuals that can be regarded as humanists.

> If you identify as an atheist, agnostic, freethinker, rationalist, sceptic, cynic, secular humanist, naturalist, or deist; as spiritual apathetic, nonreligious, "nothing"; or any other irreligious descriptive, you could probably count yourself what I call a Humanist. Feel free to use whatever terminology you prefer—that's not important. We don't believe a god created perfect religions or sacred texts, so why would we believe he or she created one perfect, sacred name that all doubters were required to adopt? (Epstein, 2009, xii).

An analysis of the above gives prominence to the understanding that humanism is more of a lifestance than a worldview. And it is a stance against God, characterised by the denial of his existence, ascription of his powers to man, and sustained emphasis on the evils or mistakes of religious people. Thus, the protestation by most humanists that humanism is uncompromisingly secular is methodical and may also explain the extant emphasis on lifestance as against worldview or philosophy in the understanding of the term. Humanism as a philosophy or worldview is more likely to be accommodative of the religions. Take for example this old definition of the term given by Erich Fromm.

> by … humanism I refer to a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and to arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world. Radical humanism considers the goal of man to be that of complete independence, and this implies penetrating through fictions and illusions to full awareness of reality (Fromm, 1966, 13).

Indeed, there are ample proofs that earlier humanists considered humanism as a sort of a godless religion. This is still true of Buddhism, and was also true of communism. The clearest proof that earlier humanists considered humanism as a sort of religion is found in the *A Humanist Manifesto* (1933), now known as *Humanist Manifesto I*, among whose promulgators was the Philosopher, John Dewey. This Manifesto views humanism as a new religion.

Subsequent Manifestos (1973; 1980; 2000; 2003) were all targeted at weaning humanism of any religious connotation. (Free Inquiry, 2018). Thus, since prominent proponents of humanism are scholars unconvinced of the claims of Judo-Christian and Islamic religions it becomes convenient for them to erect a system devoid of the weighty garbage of these religions. However, a reading of Harari (2015) provides an insight that besides its aversion and hatred of God, the style of humanists also involves aversion to terms or groups with any ugly historical garbage no matter how strong their irreligiosity. Thus, Harari had argued that based on their stance towards God and man, terms like communism and even Nazism should also qualify as humanism. The only explanation to give for their exclusion in the above list compiled by Epstein (2009) is humanists care to deliver a chaste and attractive alternative. This also explains humanists' critique of capitalism as anti-human and their valorisation of anarcho-socialism as an economic structure (Allen, 2017).

The Ascent of Man

The strongest description of the process that will be discussed in this section is that by Yuval Harari who, after assessment of the implication of humanism, described the *homo sapiens* that arises as a result of humanism as "the animal that became a god" (Harari, 2015: 415). This is actually an inverse of a process that began long ago. In ancient Greece, Xenophanes described the process of humanisation of gods. According to him, "humans construct deities in their own image, as animals would if they could, and Ethiopians actually do." (Cf Seaford, 2004, 284). Nothing suggests that Xenophanes doubted the existence of gods. Rather it can be shown that he was expressing his marvels at the difference between the gods he saw on his visit to Ethiopia (which since Ethiopians were black, he also discovered to be black) and the ones worshipped by the Greeks who were whites as the Greeks who made them. Xenophanes' could be an expression of human ignorance about what the gods look like but not a doubt about their existence. However, the inversion of the humanisation of the gods was started by Protagoras culminating in the deification of man. This deification is responsible for the thought system that would be later regarded as humanism. Protagora's eternal relevance stemmed from his

pioneering refusal to subject himself to divine governance and direction. Protagoras would rather that he and his fellowmen govern themselves, dictate the laws that they would obey. His reason is simple. "Of all things the measure is humankind, of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not." (Cf Seaford, 2004: 285).

The above saying has been interpreted to mean that man determines reality. He sets the boundary of what exists and what does not exist, including the gods. This goes contrary to the prevailing wisdom and belief, where gods determine earthly events, reward and punish humans according to their deeds and misdeeds. According to Plato's interpretation of Protagoras' statement, this power to determine is possessed by every individual who determines the meaning of reality to himself. Plato's charge is that this would lead to relativism (Law, 2011). It is important to note that Protagoras' humankind did not include women and slaves. The Greeks of his time excluded women from public life including philosophy and slaves were regarded as mere tools. Protagoras is reputed to have drafted the Law of Thurii, an Italian colony of Greece. (Provencal, 2015). Instructively, in no place has it ever been shown that he argued for the reversal of status of slaves and women.

There were sparse subversive arguments against the gods over the intervening centuries until the period of Enlightenment. It was the Enlightenment philosophers that mounted a fresh attack on the gods and on religion, and promoted the supremacy of human reason. Immanuel Kant, in his famous essay, "What is Enlightenment," likened reliance on priests and other interpreters of the Scripture as immaturity. Maturity, therefore, was marked by strong reliance on one's reason. An individual relying on his own interpretative powers guaranteed by reason alone would arrive at the right conclusions.

The Importance of Enlightenment to humanism is so encompassing that Monica Miller regards it as the true origin of the idea and concept of humanism (Miller, 2017). This is true especially with regard to the supreme value which humanists place on man and his capacity to reason, coupled with the interpretation that this capacity to understand things for oneself would free individuals from the hold of religious beliefs and teachings. Philosophers

like Frederick Nietzsche would later seize the opportunity offered by this new teaching to proclaim the death of God. The death of God, according to Nietzsche, freed man from all entrapments of religions and religious values. Prior to his death, God was responsible for normative moral directives which man was meant to obey. The direct consequence of this is the elevation of man to the position once occupied by God. Henceforth, man should no longer look up to God for moral guidance on how to act or on what constitutes values. He must decipher this for himself since there is no God. Short of calling the human that emerge as a consequence of his reasoning about God, Nietzsche refers to him as the superman.

The Rationality and Ethics of Humanism

The religious order had relied on God to give meaning and order to the world. It has looked up to the supernatural for explanation of events in the world and our relations to these events. But the new humanistic thinking, in supplanting religion and God, vested the power of meaning making to man. He must, by the deployment of his reason alone, decipher what is good for him. Consequently, Harari (2017) writes that the primary commandment of humanism to man is: "create meaning for a meaningless world."

Thus, there is a distinct ethical disposition that is a consequence of the ascent of man. According to this disposition, human flourishing becomes the essence of living in the world and rests on the abolition of heaven which the religions –Christianity and Islam— preach. In the humanist system, the earth as we know it is the only and final abode of man, and the responsibility of determining what that earth becomes for man lies on man alone.

> … humanity defines morals, ethics, and notions of justice. Scientific inquiry and reason are the best vehicles for explaining the emergence of the universe and all life forms, rather than recourse to supernatural causes and explanations. Thus, rather than privilege redemption or eternal reward in an afterlife, humanism reveres human potential, ingenuity, and creativity in the material world and the here and now. (Hutchinson, 2014: 96).

The humanist ethics therefore, rests on creating the religious prototype of heaven on earth; an ideal world of happiness and love. According to Law (2011), this ethics comprises "ultimately more life-affirming and life-enhancing alternatives." The attack here is mainly on

Christianity and Islam's emphasis on the otherworldly. There is the confidence that the triumph of humanism, especially its emphasis on reason, would lead to a world of peace, prosperity and contentment (Law, 2011). Humanism relies heavily on science, which they interpret as one of the greatest achievements of human reasoning, to achieve this. The belief here is that a world governed by science will make life easier, eliminate diseases and poverty, and guarantee human happiness for all.

Humanist Understanding of Conflict

Western philosophical thought is said to rest on the idea of conflict as the driving force of human civilisation and development (Colasanti, 2011). Thomas Hobbes, who founded this idea, rooted it on human nature. He held that by nature man is characterised by destructive violence against his fellow men. "To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent: that *nothing can be unjust*. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice" (Hobbes cited in Byron, 2015: 12). Thus, the entrance into society, as well as the formation of government, the idea of justice and injustice, the formulation of law and morality are all consequences of destructive violence that derive from the nature of man.

The humanists inveigh against this idea of man. Pinker (2017) paints Hobbes as a victim of history. He argues that the theorisation of wars as permanent human nature of man derived from the fact that war was a permanent feature of many societies so it was possible for him to view it as a destiny of mankind escapable only through the power of a strongman who can force obedience. Rather than conflict, humanism emphasizes sympathy as a major characteristic of human nature. Thus, where the Hobbesian humans see the state of nature as a condition for conflict and violent relations, the humanists view the world as providing a condition for cooperation among men. They predicate this on human reason which directs man alright on the true nature of relation with his fellow man.

> …reason tells you that…you have the responsibility to provide to others what you expect for yourself. You can foster the welfare of other sentient beings by enhancing life, health, knowledge, freedom, abundance, safety, beauty, and

> peace. History shows that when we sympathize with others and apply our ingenuity to improving the human condition, we can make progress in doing so, and you can help to continue that progress (Pinker, 2017: 3).

Through sympathy one extends the best wishes he has for himself to others. Thus, if the basic human instinct, for instance, is the preservation of self, he extends the right to this to others since his reason tells him at once that the other also seeks for preservation of himself. With this, humanists hold that the system which they promote is one that will eliminate conflicts which they argue rest on non-humanistic philosophies and religion. Particularly humanists find the Christian religion as exemplifying the capacity of religion to engender conflicts among men. The history of Christianity, especially since the reign of Constantine, is marked with repression, and wars fought in the name of God. Thus, humanists hold on to this and point out that in a world governed by humanistic thought, where reason alone informs actions, the urge to war will be completely eliminated.

What is guaranteed in such a world is human flourishing, understood as a glorious era of well-being, happiness, love, and peace. Science has a major role to play here since its advancement will lead man into an unimagined era of prosperity. To bring about such a state of peace and human flourishing, humanists look up to the emergence of a process advocated by Kant in another of his famous writings, "Perpetual Peace."

> In "Perpetual Peace," Kant laid out measures that would discourage leaders from dragging their countries into war. Together with international commerce, he recommended representative republics (what we would call democracies), mutual transparency, norms against conquest and internal interference, freedom of travel and immigration, and a federation of states that would adjudicate disputes between them. (Pinker, 2017: 13).

Pinker celebrates the 1948 declaration of universal human rights as a triumph of humanistic ideals. One, it united world governments into taking decisions that would guarantee peace and human flourishing. Two, the declaration united every human person deeply divided by their creed, colour, geography, and so on. It also drew attention that despite perceived differences man remains fundamentally the same.

What if We Arm the Prophet? Deconstructing Conflict Management in a Humanist World

The intention in this section is to imagine conflict management in a world governed by humanistic ideals. In doing so, the idea of humanism as a religion as advocated by Harari (2015; 2017) is taken for granted despite humanists' claim to the contrary. According to Harari (2015: 227) religion "is a system of human norms and values that is founded on belief in a superhuman order." Schumpeter, while identifying Marxist socialism as religion, also highlights some important characteristics of religion with which the religious credentials of any system is to be judged.

Like all religions, humanism is also presented as the absolute truth, before which all other alternatives are false. Absolute truths, when not backed by political power, are content to dwell on the level of ideas and theorise the welfare and goodness of man. However, when backed by political powers, they become injurious to alternatives (not necessarily contradictory) systems. This was true of Marxism and Nazism (Harari, 2015). In the case of Nazism, it led to the gradation of races and execution of 3 million Jews. Marxism on the other hand led to the entrenchment of totalitarian governments in which dissent of any type was forbidden.

Humanism holds such prospects as Marxism and Nazism. With its emphasis on reason and science, humanism on acquiring political power stands the danger of grading human beings according to their capacity to reason and engage in science. Individuals lacking this ability may be regarded as lesser humans. There is already evidence of this in the writings of some humanist authors.

> As we know, some of the most influential mid-twentieth century freethinkers wrote and spoke harshly against certain groups such as African Americans. For example, James Hervey Johnson, who edited the *Truth Seeker*, advocated for eugenic programs and tactics. Today, his legacy is still alive and well through the James Hervey Johnson foundation, which provides huge sums of money to various freethought organizations. Woolsey Teller was another leading freethought bigot. … (Allen, 2017: 107).

Indeed, the history of atheistic humanism supports the practices cited above. For instance, despite the writings of John Locke, cited among the promoters of the Enlightenment, about equality of man and his rights, he was reported to have kept slaves without scruples. Even Jefferson and other humanist promoters of American Independence who made grand pronouncements about man felt that the African was excluded from the people they wrote about. System with such an exclusive thought pattern, rather than peace, will promote war.

Besides the above, humanism is unsuccessfully conceived as an order in opposition to all religious orders. The entailment here is that it is founded on conflict. This is seen in the manner in which it is opposed by other religions, and the manner in which it, in turn, is opposed to them. Interestingly, some of the accusations of dehumanisation of the human person which humanism levels against religions are ones which only Christianity, Islam and Judaism are guilty of. Neither Buddhism nor African Traditional Religion is guilty of the crimes which humanism spotlights in religion. However, since it makes its allegation without any form of discrimination, it can be said, conclusively, that humanism derives its life in a divisive, dualistic epistemology of *Us vs Them; Humanists vs Non-Humanists* with its attendant consequences.

There is also another danger from humanist's over-emphasis and reliance on reason. This danger comes from the assumption that many men relying on reason alone will come to the same 'rational' and favourable decision on all issues. This is far from reality. Even among philosophers, the employment of reason has led to varying outcomes. The pursuit of these rational outcomes has not always been favourable to men. Nazism, for instance, was a product of reasoning and yet it was responsible for one of the greatest group crimes in history.

Finally, humanism's hope for a conflict-free world rests on naïve conception of contemporary conflicts and even of states. Most contemporary conflicts are as a result of natural disasters. Though humanists hope that the prosperous era of science will lead to solutions, the reality is that mankind is yet to get these solutions and these natural disasters continue to occur, displacing populations and driving them into unknown territories. Humanist

theory that sympathy among people will drive them to assist one another has not been helpful in mobilising other nations into opening their borders to the displaced individuals from other nations. Thus, despite the preponderance of humanistic thinking, the human condition has not improved.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the claim that humanism as an atheistic social order will engender human flourishing, and therefore peace. Either as a lifestance or thought system, humanism is built on the belief that religion and its dogmas are irrational. Based on this, humanists project a social order short of religion but resting on the hope that science and reason holds the key to human progress. The humanist social order was also conceived as an egalitarian one in which conflict and violence will be non-existent. In interrogating this claim, the paper interrogates the fundamental assumptions of humanism. Its discovery is that despite its claims to the contrary humanism is a religion. As a religion, some of the criticisms against other religions can also be levelled against humanism. Thus, if other religions have led to human rights abuse and violent conflicts, humanism has the innate capacity to also result into these. Thus, instead of solution, humanism is more likely to complicate conflict situations around the world.

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