

Modes of Modern Humanism; A Critical Study**Amira Sami**Lecturer, International Islamic University, Islamabad.
amirasami44@gmail.com**Abstract**

The term Humanism has a long history with its roots tracing back into the past including Greek philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes; the Roman Empire; Averroes, Chinese philosopher Confucius and Ancient Indian thought. During the renaissance period it emerged, and during the enlightenment and reformation period it flourished and in the nineteenth century it started to adopt the form in which it is present today. The answer to the question “what Humanism is?” depends upon the type of humanist we ask.

Keywords: Religious Humanism, Secular Humanism, Ethical Relativism, Naturalism

Introduction

The modern humanism (mostly referred to as *Humanism* with a capital 'H') has basically emerged out of *religious humanism*, that gradually turned into non -theistic **Modern(with capital M) Humanism**, which is also prevalent today with the title *Secular Humanism*.¹

The word **Humanism** doesn't imply only the meaning of humanitarianism it is only one of its aspects. Extremely religious and traditionalist could be deeply indulged in humanitarian activities despite of being great opponents of humanism.

To understand Modern Humanism it is necessary to understand the basic principles of Humanism that sometimes relate and mostly differentiate it from other philosophical views.

The **first** principle that Humanism embraces is the belief in scientific materialism. It is basically an attitude toward the universe that denounces the existence of supernatural and considers them as myths. Nature exists independently of any mind and is considered to be a continuously varying system of matter and energy.ⁱ

Secondly, Humanism asserts that human beings are an evolutionary product of the Nature. Our minds are indivisibly connected with our brains and there is a unity between our body and personality which will be having no cognizant survival after death.ⁱⁱ

The **third** and foremost principle of humanism is to have ultimate faith on human reason, cognition and scientific methods. It believes that human mind is free from the boundaries of any supernatural power and human reason and scientific methods are the supreme powers possessed by human beings to solve their problems.ⁱⁱⁱ

Fourthly, Humanism illustrates that the individuals attain a respectable and suitable life by amicably combining their fulfillments, personal satisfactions and self-advancements with those essential, beneficial and significant tasks and activities that play an indispensable role in the welfare of the society.^{iv}

Fifth, Humanism is contrary to all the general philosophies of fatalism, universal determinism^v and predestination. It claims that individuals, while molded by the past have certifiable flexibility of imaginative decisions and possess extensive freedom of action. In fact human beings are the designer of their own destiny within certain objective limits.

The **sixth** principle of humanism is based on the grounds that all human values are dependent on ethics and morality. The ultimate goal of human is to achieve progress, happiness and advancement either cultural, social, economic but ethical and non-theistic.^{vi}

¹ Cork Humanists, “History of Humanism,” Cork Humanists, accessed June 1, 2017, <http://corkhumanists.weebly.com/history-of-humanism.html>.

Seventh, Humanism promotes the social platforms that work for advancement of peace, harmony and an exclusive requirement of living ,both national and worldwide. It provides freedom of expression in every aspect either social, political, cultural. It also promotes the democratic system and the advocates the civil liberties at the governmental level.^{vii}

Eight, Humanism trusts in advancement of artistic production and cognizance of beauty. It also embraces the grandeur and the beauty of nature, so that the artistic experience may become an ubiquitous reality in this world.^{viii}

Ninth, Humanism is an advance philosophy that always has a space for newly evolving facts. It believes in raising questions and challenging the existing dogmas that are contrary to rational reasoning.^{ix}

The **tenth** principle of humanism explains that it is a blissful substitute to those traditional religions that have a concept of a supernatural deity and life after death .It affirms that there is no solid clue to support that an otherworldly being ever desired or demanded anything from the individuals, at any time spoke to the people, or ever intruded with the orders of nature to benefit or to hurt or anybody. Regarding life in a hereafter Humanists maintains that life in this world in the only blessed one. As humans, we have the knowledge of this fragile planet and it is the obligatory duty of every human to make this world a better and a peaceful place to live.^x

Hence, Humanism(Modern Humanism is a multi-faceted philosophy and can be labelled as “secular humanism. democratic humanism, scientific humanism or naturalistic humanism.” embraces a worldview in which human decisions are taken through reason, rational thinking and scientific knowledge. Its completely human oriented ,without the intervention of any super natural being.^{xi}

Modes of Modern Humanism:

Modern Humanism is sub categorized into religious and secular humanism.^{xii}

1) Religious Humanism:

From the title “religious” it seems that this category of humanism would be either metaphysical, supernatural and theistic but in actual it is not like that.

To define the term “religion” in one single definition is a complex phenomenon. Some definitions will be so exclusive and narrow that they will not consider even Buddhism as religion and some definitions will be so inclusive and comprehensive that they will define the social behaviors such as socialism, communism as religion.^{xiii}

“If religion is expressed in terms of faith and belief then a worldview that consolidates humanistic convictions and ideas would be called *as religious humanism*.^{xiv}

Types of Religious Humanism:

According to Dr.Joseph Chuman *religious humanism* could be classified into following types:^{xv}

- Nature mysticism
- Reverent agnosticism
- Deweyan idealism
- Non-instrumental holism
- The first type of religious humanism discovers the relationship between the man and the natural world. It provides a worldview that promotes uniqueness of life that how it is so

great to be in this world without the interference of any divine and supernatural being. *Nature mysticism* affirms the realization that human is the product of nature and of the same primordial evolutionary powers that have shaped all life, and to nature man has to return.^{xvi}

- The second type of *religious humanism* is the *reverent agnosticism*. Dr. Joseph Chuman explains this by using the metaphor presented by Isaac Newton:
- “I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a little boy playing on the seashore; and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”^{xvii}
- The same is the situation of mankind before the *unknown*. The ignorance before a cosmic *unknown* is the view of an agnostic. In his opinion, the collective knowledge of humankind is just a minute spec within an ocean of ignorance. In our lives, we experience facts that are obscure and to be explored but beside that we also confront unknowables. Human knowledge is surrounded by our intelligent but finite mind, cognitive faculties and our senses. But outside this boundary, we may infer the existence of a substantially more extensive reality, that is beyond our limitation and sight. Same as the range of X-rays are beyond our limitation and sight. This would be explained as if our minds are the lights searching in the darkness. The rays and beam of our light becomes finite at a point and we realize that there is reality beyond that point. So we infer that there is an outside and we are inside a boundary of our senses faculties. But we didn't distinguish what sort of veracity is outside our faculties.
- The metaphor can sum-up this whole discussion will be as: “If we all live out our lives in a room that is completely sealed.” This realization of limited boundaries before an infinite universe produces not only a feeling of modesty but with the nature mystic, a feeling of awe and astonishment, with reverence and gratitude.^{xviii}
- Dr. Joseph Chuman further discusses that the traditional religious believers entitle the agnostics as arrogant and secular and accuse them of replacing God with man. But according to them the traditionalists are arrogant who believe that God exists and he only do what he wants from us. The agnostics are having the quality of modesty and humility as they had realized the capacity, limitations and boundaries of human knowledge and universe.^{xix}
- The third variant of *religious humanism* is described as “*non-instrumentalist holism*”. According to Dr. Chuman it is a subtle admiration of those imperceptible values and that we adopt from the material things of this universe. The religious and spiritual dedication is actually centered on the fundamental values and the essence of the things not on their material existence. To be religious or spiritual means to be conscious of the utmost process for which the instrumentalities subsist. When we see the excellence behind the artistic creation, and when we perceive the multi-sided plan and design of nature, actually we understand and feel the spirituality. Similarly, when we see something as everyday as law and government, yet consider them to be functional systems that mirror the estimations and standards of equity, autonomy and self-determination, at that point we have learned the spiritual dimension that lies behind these instrumentalities.^{xx}
- This idea of “*non-instrumentalist holism*” could be better understood in particular reference to our relations with other individuals. In our daily life we confront many people, the first and main thing which we mostly notice in someone is his face. After that we see their gestures and listen what they utter. At exactly that point we build a holistic and more comprehensive understanding of who the individual actually is. Mostly we praise what we see. But in some cases we are unaffected. And in few different experiences what we perceive is repulsive. But if we will put some more effort what we frequently find is that the individual is more complicated than what he appeared at first glance.

- Every human experience many things in his daily life. He will either choose the instrumentalist approach to abuse or to deal with a person. Or he will treat the people in a decent manner whether talking with a millionaire or dealing with a waiter in a hotel or a child begging in the street. He will value the needy by helping , appreciating and being honest with them. This non-instrumentalist admiration of mankind give rise to *ethics*. It is a vivacious connection and relationship that is spiritual and free from any self -interest.^{xxi}
- The fourth type of *religious humanism* is known as *Deweyan idealism*. It talks and brings us nearer to the human domain. As opposed to Felix Adler, Dewey did not trust that ideals are engrossed in the universe. He trusted that individuals make ideals out of their creative impulses but they are not made out of fanciful stuff. Being intelligent and critical thinkers our beliefs and ideals emerge out of our dissatisfaction .When we encounter a problem, for example, being earth bound, and through our intelligence power we invent a perfect reaction, for example, a spaceship. That creation will become a driving force that will push us into a thoughtful process of inventively settling down our issues and place us in a more powerful, productive association with reality and our world. Dewey outlines this association as religious.^{xxii}
- Dewey wanted to eliminate the religious from religion. Traditionally religion relates to the foundations, the ideologies, the customs and the accessories that typically connect with conventional religion. In Dewey's view we can have a religious (spiritual) association with our goals or ideals that motivates and pushes us towards cognitive imagination and finally the realization of the actual world .In his view this spiritual affiliation with the ideals should to be found in every aspect like in our profession and in different vocations.^{xxiii}

Development of religious Humanism in America:

The above discussion was a brief overview of various types of *religious humanism*. To know more about the philosophy of *religious humanism* let us give a look to the history and development of this term in USA.

In 1927 , a “Humanist Fellowship” was organized at the University of Chicago (*that was superseded by Humanist Press Association in 1935*) by those Unitarian Professors and alumni's who had turned away from their and beliefs in supernatural and theism. The next step taken by them was the launching of the “*The New Humanist magazine*” to provide and promote a path for the Unitarian movement.^{xxiv}

Around the similar time, a Baptist Charles Francis Potter established *The First Humanist Society of New York*. He started this organization with its goal being a *religious humanist society*. John Dewey, Julian Huxley and Albert Einstein were the protuberant members of that society. In his book, “*Humanism: A New Religion*”, Francis Potter presented his philosophy by superseding the traditional theistic beliefs with the humanist philosophy. He promoted rationalism, naturalism, socialism and materialism.^{xxv} His aim was to establish a religion that should be pure from theistic religious worldviews and thus in his above mentioned book he used the term *religious humanism* ;“a new doctrine for a modern age” Or “a modern religion for the future.”^{xxvi}

In 1933 ,a major humanist breakthrough was accomplished when a *Humanist Manifesto*(*also known as Humanist Manifesto I*) was composed through the mutual effort and cooperation of thirty-four national masses, in which John Dewey and a Unitarian scholar Lester Mondale were also included.^{xxvii} In short it was an artifact of numerous minds.

It was an officially and publically signed Manifesto ,enumerating the essential principles of humanism. In its preface its clearly written that, it was documented to illustrate an emerging philosophy not a new dogma or religion. But the term “**religious humanism**” is evident from

the document of *Humanist Manifesto I*.^{xxviii} So we cannot deny the fact that humanist who signed the *Humanist Manifesto*(1933) were promoting humanism as religion. But they denounce the traditional division of sacred and secular and argue that the relation to sacred things and phenomenon should not be the part of religion.^{xxix}

Humanist Manifesto(1933) presents fifteen articles out of which eight uses the language that entails recognition that “*humanism is a religion*”. In the **first article**, the belief of *religious humanists* regarding the universe has mentioned that it is not created but self-existed. **Article eight** uses the word *religious humanism* to be responsible for the acknowledgment of human’s identity and destiny. In **article thirteen** *religious humanism* explains that all organizations and associations exist for the satisfaction of human life and the purpose of humanism is to assess ,control, modify and the enhancement of these institutions .And for their effective functioning religious organizations, their ceremonial structures and communal strategies must be reconstituted. And the last passage of that Manifesto starts with the words, "So stands the theses of religions humanism."^{xxx}

The signers of *Humanist Manifesto I* claimed that to them the religious structures and thoughts of their ancestors seems no longer satisfactory. They believed that religion needs a new statement that will give an alternative meaning and purpose to human life. A Man should be fully conscious of the fact that he himself is competent enough to fulfill his aims and to solve his problems. He has the power of intelligence for the realization of his issues and for the accomplishment of his goals.^{xxxi}

In 1941 The American Humanist Association was established when the Humanist Press Association was reorganized into AHA. The objective of this association was not to shape a new religion as Potter had initially expected but in fact its motive was to identify the secular and nontheistic phenomenon of humanism. This organization was open to both members either religious or non- religious.^{xxxii}

In the beginning of 1940’s the criticism on theism reached its peak. The government courts began to widen and enhance the meaning of religion until by the end of 1960s the legal meaning of religion was shifted from theism to humanism. The courts defined religion as an “ultimate concern” of an individual. Thusly, prompted the courts meaning of humanism as religion.

2) Secular Humanism:

Secular humanism embraces a philosophy that denies the interference of any kind of transcendental and spiritual being in human’s life.^{xxxiii} It believes in human cognition and denounces the theistic religious beliefs. It stands on the notion that in the realm of rationality and logic, the existence of supernatural beings and their doctrines are not possible. So it can be said that, Secular humanism supports naturalism over supernatural and rational over metaphysical .^{xxxiv}It trusts that man is solely capable of being morally good without the assistance of a god. It asserts that a human himself is responsible and can accomplish his own happiness. Through reason and intellect and his own effort a man can achieve social, economic and political success.

Professor Paul Kurtz^{xxxv} is generally proclaimed as the promoter and the founder of Secular Humanism. He was the follower of *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) that seek to give an alternative meaning to religion without the exclusive need of God in all matters.^{xxxvi} He followed this path in the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973) with more innovative views regarding traditional theism.^{xxxvii} He proclaimed that those who signed the *Humanist Manifesto II* were not inventing a new creed.^{xxxviii}

The whole *Manifesto II* didn’t contain the term *religious humanism*. The manifesto claimed that traditional religions, theism and their moral code are outmoded and are not

enough to fulfill the requisites and challenges of the modern world. Reason, ethics and intelligence are the autonomous powers every man possesses. There is no substitute for them. The only duty of every individual is to explore these powers to enhance, his strength and abilities and to sort solutions for his problems. Traditional creeds are not absolute. The beliefs that prevail today might change tomorrow. There is no scientific evidence to prove the existence of supernatural. Ultimately, secular humanists begin with humans not God, rational not metaphysical, nature not divinity.^{xxxix}

The term “Secular Humanism” is the product of Secular Humanist Declaration (1980).^{xl} This declaration was basically a sequel to the previous *Humanist Manifestos (I and II)*.

Few major characteristics of Secular Humanism highlighted by Paul Kurtz are; Humanism encompasses a naturalistic worldview.^{xli} It is nontheistic^{xlii} and depicts a democratic ideology. It is a method of investigation through human reason and it revolves around humanistic ethics. The key factor of humanistic ethics is that kind of human autonomy that doesn't allow to harm other individuals socially, politically and morally.^{xliii}

The basic principle of secular humanism according to Kurtz is the *skeptical inquiry*.^{xliv} He attacked astrology and pseudoscience through Skeptical and Scientific method of Inquiry.^{xlv} According to him, when one achieves wisdom through skepticism few components become a part of his life. The first one is the happiness which is attained by concentrating on the self. The second is the achievement of the self-realization. And finally living a life with the recognition of values like self-control, moderation, self-love and creativity.^{xlvi} Kurtz Humanism highly emphasizes on reason and objective knowledge. He believed that *objective knowledge* is achieved through the synthesis of skepticism and scientific ways of inquiry.^{xlvii}

Theological and Philosophical Interpretation of Secular Humanism:

Theologically Paul Kurtz views Secular Humanism as atheism. According to him the one who believes in a creator God and embrace Him as a supernatural source cannot be a humanist.^{xlviii} Most of the times atheism led the Secular Humanists to embrace *ethical relativism; the dogma that there are no absolute veracities and a man has freedom to change his ethical codes on the basis of his own judgements*.^{xlix}

Philosophically the secular humanists claim to be *naturalists*. Nature exists independently of any mind and is considered to be a continuously varying system of matter and energy. There is no divine, no sacred dimensions and no cognizant survival after death. So if there is no creator God then it means that everything within this world is a product of natural phenomenon, which means that the secular humanist believes in evolution. The famous evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley has stated that the soul, body and mind of man are not created by a God and all are the outcome of evolution.¹

Thus, *secular humanism* could be explained as ethical relativism, atheism, evolution and naturalism.

In search of knowledge some of Muslim minds continued to pursue discourses that were primarily humanistic. As the core philosophy of humanism embraces human cognition and intellect as their sole guide instead of a supernatural being which contradicts the concept of Tawheed that is the bedrock of Islam. Many Muslims in the west follow Islam as a cultural identity but claiming one self as a Muslim and a *Humanist* at a time would be a contradictory statement. Few aspects of humanism like accepting the status of human's intellect, seeking new knowledge, making discoveries, doing charity could be admired by a Muslim but as a whole a Muslim cannot claim to be a humanist.

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ⁱⁱ Lamont., 14.

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^{xli} Paul Kurtz, *What Is Secular Humanism?* (Prometheus Books, 2007), 21-22.

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