

Humanism, Islam and Mysticism

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Abstract

Humanism can be viewed as a logical sequence of the inquiry based knowledge and independent thought process. Mysticism is a tendency to look at the world in the mirror of self. As a movement it is similar to humanism from many aspects. Islam acknowledges the importance of material world and stresses upon the study of the universe. Islam, mysticism and humanism share many of the core themes and ideals and aim at the exaltation of man.

Humanism is a philosophy as well as an approach towards life which recognizes the value and dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things. It has been defined as:

A system of thought or action which is concerned with merely human interests (as distinguished from divine), or with those of the human race in general (as distinguished from individual).(1)

The term "humanism" has been derived from "humanitas", a Latin word, meaning education of man in the disciplines like liberal arts which are proper to man and differentiate him from other animals.(2) This specific

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concept is the central theme of Renaissance. In this sense it is considered to be a complex intellectual movement, primarily literary and philological in nature, which had significant historical, philosophical and religious implications. The Renaissance humanists believed in the revival of Greek and Latin classics in terms of form and norm. They were in search of new aesthetic standards as well as had a desire for more enlightened ethical and religious values. They found both of these qualities in Greek and Latin classics which contained the best model for a powerful Latin style and all the lessons one needed to lead a moral and effective life. In its return to antiquity, humanism found inspiration in man's personal quest for truth and goodness and realization of self, strengthening human worth and individual dignity. They did not merely aim at reviving the classical poetry, rhetoric, history, ethics and politics, or a simple repetition of the ancient past, but strived for the rebirth of the spirit possessed by man in the classical age, and lost in the Middle Ages.

In this context, it is important to know the main features of humanism which distinguish it from other philosophies and movements. These specific aspects of humanism not only help us determine its role and impact on European civilization but also contribute to establish its relationship with Islam and mysticism.

One of the major themes of Renaissance humanism was exaltation of the freedom. It is the freedom which man can and should exercise in nature and in society. It was based on the revolt against all the fundamental institutions of the medieval world including the empire, the church and the feudalism, which were considered earlier the guardians of the cosmic order.

As man was not allowed to modify any of these to the slightest degree and was not able analyze the existing system by applying rationality, his rational self protested against this rigidity and raised voice for the freedom of thought and expression. This revolt was experienced by many Muslim thinkers as well long before it became popular in Europe. This will be discussed in detail later. Mysticism, itself developed as a form of revolt against orthodoxy. Thus we find a strong bond between these three philosophies which emphasize on the freedom of thought in a somewhat distinct manner.

The second important theme of humanism is its focus on the world of Nature. It implies that man is a part of nature. Nature is his realm and the features like his body, his needs and his sensations, which tie him to nature, are essential to him. These features cannot be ignored or abstracted. Thus humanists not only exalted the soul of man for its powers of freedom, but also did not forget the significance of body that pertains to it. Again, Islam also acknowledges the importance of material world and stresses upon the study of the universe. It also discourages the aptitude of neglecting the body and its needs. Mysticism, in the course of history, has sometimes deviated from this objective; however Islamic mysticism has not only accepted the worldly needs and obligations as a part of life but also has chosen the way of love and compassion for humanity to attain the personal mystic experience of oneness with God.

Renaissance humanism created the environment that contributed to the birth of modern science. The neglected doctrines of the Pythagoreans, the works of Archimedes, Hippocrates and the other physicians were

revived. Leonardo, Copernicus and Galileo maintained the thesis of Platonism and Pythagoreanism and derived that the nature is written in mathematical characters and to understand it, one must know the language of mathematics. This concept had already been emphasized by a Muslim Philosopher Al-Kindi in ninth century.

It is widely presumed that humanism is a secular movement but studying the history of humanism, one concludes that despite its antipathy towards asceticism and theology, humanism did not have an anti-religious or anti-Christian character. Humanists discussed the traditional problems of God and providence, soul and its immortality and freedom in the context of humanism. These discussions assumed a new significance under the umbrella of humanism. They did so with the purpose of understanding and justifying the initiative of man in the world. The religious discussions of the humanists had two principal themes: the civil functions of the religion and the religious tolerance.

The civil function of the religion was based on the correspondence between the heavenly and earthly cities. The heavenly city was the norm or the ideal of man's civil life and its recognition meant the commitment of man to realize its characteristics in the earthly city. According to Gianozzo Manetti, Lorenzo Valla and many other humanists, the fundamental function of the religion was to support man in the work of civil life, in political work and activity.

Humanism, in its religious aspect, is profoundly permeated by the spirit of tolerance. This concept is a bit different from the concept of tolerance which became popular in the modern world as an effect of the

religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and which implies the possibility of peaceful co-existence between various religious confessions that remain different from each other and cannot be reduced to a single confession. Instead the humanists derive the attitude of tolerance from their conviction of the fundamental unity of all the religious beliefs of mankind. Therefore, they believe in the possibility of a universal religious peace. Moreover, the humanists believe in the essential identity between philosophy and religion implied by this religious peace. Marsilio Ficino in his "De Christiana Religione", and Pico della Mirandola in his "The Oration of the Dignity of Man", has proposed to lay the foundation of the universal peace through different methods. The return to the origins means the return to the religious peace of the happy ancestors of the human race and end of theological hatred and intolerance. Later in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the great Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) and the English writer Thomas More (1478-1535) defended this concept of the religious tolerance in a modern and effective way.(3) Until then humanism has retained its religious status intact. The secular features adopted by Humanism are an outcome of the political, economic, social and psychological crisis of European societies in nineteenth and twentieth century.

We can see Renaissance humanism in another perspective as well. Though it is always said to be an outcome of the revival of Latin and Greek liberal arts; it also has its roots in the Medieval Islamic world. The revival of Greek philosophy was initiated by Arabs in the seventh century. As a result the significance of liberalism, attention towards the material world

and initiation of scientific inquiry was stressed upon and the strife to establish a society based on the basic principles adopted by humanism became prominent. Many medieval Muslim thinkers had been involved in humanistic, rational and scientific discourses in their search for truth and knowledge. They had endeavored to find the meaning of life and a system of universal ethical values for human beings. As it has been acknowledged in these words:

A wide range of Islamic writings on love poetry, history and philosophical theology shows that the medieval Islamic thought was open to the humanistic ideas of individualism, occasional secularism, skepticism and liberalism. It also includes the art of dictation, called in Latin, *ars dictaminis* and the humanist attitude towards classical language.(4)

Under the influence of Greek philosophy and the teachings of the holy Qur'an that emphasized on profound thinking and contemplating, Muslim philosophers, not only raised questions about the relationship between God, man and universe but also contributed to develop an atmosphere of liberal thought and a tolerant society. Though they did not deny the authority of a divine, supernatural being, yet they focused on a rational thinking process and also concentrated on the world of nature. To get a true picture of the enlightened Muslim society of that period, it is important to have a look on the development of Muslim philosophy.

The first group of Muslim philosophers that emerged soon after the period of Khulafai Rashideen, was called Mu'tazilla. It was a movement of

seventh century aimed at interpretation of the dogmas of religion in terms of reason. It consisted of a number of independent thinkers who had quite individualistic views about various religious and philosophical problems. They believed in Divine unity and Divine justice. Another group, called Ikhwan-al Safa, was a secret association of scientists and philosophers, established in Basra in 983A.D. which used to hold meetings where the members used to read out treatises on scientific, philosophical and religious subjects. These treatises dealt with mathematics, logic, metaphysics, mysticism, astrology, magic and also with natural sciences such as astronomy, meteorology, geography, botany, zoology, physiology, embryology, physics, chemistry, anthropology, etc. They, like Pythagoreans, had a great fascination for the numbers. Philosophers like Al-kindi (803-873 A.D.) brought science and philosophy together. His mathematical application of quantitative methods in the field of medicine, optics and music is recognized by Briffault in his work, *The Making of Humanity*, as the first attempt in the history of scientific thought to realize the importance of quantitative method.(5)

As for as the secular concepts, adopted afterwards by the humanists, are concerned, Abu Bakr Al-Razi (864-924) has emerged as an independent thinker and philosopher in this respect. He denies the possibility of reconciliation between philosophy and religion. His views against religion are the most violent in the course of the Middle Ages. He strongly believes in the equality of man and does not accept the spiritual supremacy of the prophet hood. He claims that it is blind tradition and custom that keeps men tied to the religion and that is why the religions have

always been hostile to philosophical speculations and scientific research. He also denies the Holy Scriptures and believes that works of Plato, Aristotle and Hippocrates have been of much more greater service to humanity. He is against all forms of asceticism and accepts the Aristotelian dictum that no blame rests with human passion as such except their excessive indulgence. He also condemns all kinds of self-mortification, monasticism and hermit life.

Likewise, Al-Farabi (870-950), Ibn Sina, known as Avicenna, (980-1037), Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Ibn Bajjah (1106-38), Ibn Tufail (1110-85), Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-98), and Ibn Khaldon (1332-1406) were the philosophers who not only explained the philosophies of great Greek thinkers but also prepared a favourable environment for the development of science and philosophy. Ibn-Khaldon is considered the father of the science of history and one of the founders of sociology.(6)

There is no doubt about it that the Muslim intellectuals contributed a lot in the development of an enlightened and scientific world and an objective perspective about the man and universe which resulted in European renaissance. The movement of Humanism can also be viewed as a logical sequence of the inquiry based knowledge and independent thought process initiated by Muslim philosophers.

If the Muslim philosophers contributed in developing the quantitative and scientific approach, mysticism lent it power of love and compassion. Mysticism is another movement that contributed to some vital aspects of humanism. "Mysticism would best be thought of as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions,

traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions."(7) Apart from the philosophical aspects of mysticism, it played a significant role in the development of tolerance, love for humanity in general, respect for individual insight and liberation from the monotonous conformity of rules. Thus it encouraged creativity and moderation in the society and took part in the growth of art and literature. As it has been said:

The mystical life is characterized by enhanced vitality, productivity, serenity, and joy as the inner and outward aspects harmonize in union with God.(8)

Mysticism is a tendency to look at the world in the mirror of self. It is a universal movement which is not limited to any particular religion or sect. It has been associated with Neo-Platonism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. As a movement it is similar to humanism in its basic aspects of love, service to humanity, realization of self as a reflection of the Divinity, emphasis on liberation from the blind practice of rituals without rationalizing their significance and development of the ideas of human equality, tolerance and forbearance. Mysticism has always been a source of artistic and creative activity and has played a vital role in liberating human communities from the prejudice of colour, caste and creed.

If we view the long mystic traditions in the sub continent which are rooted in Vedantism and have passed through many phases including Buddhism, Jainism, Bhagti Movement and Islam, we find that the development of most of the forms of literature, music, and other forms of art are indebted to Mysticism for their birth and growth in almost all the languages of the Sub-continent.

Muslim mystics entered in this region after 1000 A.D. and traveled through out the length and breadth of India during Muslim regime in and after the tenth century. They had brought with them the Muslim mystic traditions which were influenced by Neo-Platonism, Christianity and Irani mysticism. However, the specific Islamic features distinguished Muslim mysticism from other mystic systems in the region and it attracted a great number of people. In fact, it was the spirit of Islamic mysticism that raised the literature in Urdu, Sindhi, Pushto and Punjabi, as it did in Arabic and Persian. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has rightly said that in the field of Islamic literature what is most universal belongs to the domain of Sufism.(9)

Thus mysticism becomes another source of humanistic ideals prevailing world wide. The only difference lies in the metaphysical beliefs and faiths that contribute towards Islamic and mystic approaches while a particular group of humanists called secular does not accept it as a source of human guidance and denies the divine, intuitional aspects of human wisdom. However, Islam, mysticism and humanism share many of the core themes and ideals and aim at the exaltation of man.



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