

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Humanism as a Category of Religious Alternative

Offiong Offiong Asuquo

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar Calabar,
Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Man is faced with several problems in life and issues which disturb and frighten him. There are some other issues of life which he does not understand, for instance, the source of life, the origin of death, the nature of the hereafter. He also desires peace, comfort and security in life. These and several other reasons have made man to search for answers and solutions to his predicament. This search has given rise to the various known religions. However, despite the existence of these religions, man's problem still persists. This situation has made some people to suggest or advocate the adoption of other secular alternatives to religion, with the hope that they may solve man's problems. This paper examines one of such secular alternatives called Humanism. In this process, it examines its meaning, and the merits and demerits of some humanistic theories. This is meant to help the reader to decide whether to adopt it or not.

Keywords: Humanism, Humanist Theories, Religious Alternative.

MEANING OF RELIGION

Religion is a complex phenomenon which is hard to define. The complexity can be seen in the various definitions given to it. For instance Edward Tylor defines religion as a belief in spiritual beings. It has also been used to describe a system or code of ethics, way of life and practices such as the Theravada Buddhism and Hummurabi's codes.

According to Islam, religion involves a belief in God, coupled with a way of life and culture without which it will not be a complete religion. Despite these ambiguities, a common and workable meaning can be deduced, which is that, religion is a social or human institution which is characterized by elements like rituals to perform, formulas to recite, tales to narrate, objects to manipulate, places to frequent or avoid, holy days

to keep, natural phenomena by which to predict the future, charismatic leaders to follow, truths to affirm, a literature to ponder and precepts to obey (Benton, 109).

This analytic definition will at least cover most of the phenomena that is referred to as religion. Having examined the meaning of religion, it is proper to establish whether religious alternatives are needed. In order to do this, it is necessary to look at the uses or purpose of religion and the failures or problems of religion.

IS THERE A NEED FOR RELIGIOUS ALTERNATIVES?

a) *Functions of religion* Many issues of life are beyond man's control and knowledge, hence, he looks for help from other sources such as magic, talisman and religion. This is clearly stated by Iwe as he avers that man is faced with and bothered by fundamental issues and questions like the origin of life, the purpose and ultimate meaning of human life, the answer to the restlessness and insatiability of the human spirit, the meaning of ultimate existence, and the reality of the existence of God. Other questions are; if God exists, how does he relate to the world of creatures/ is death the final end of man or is there life after death? How is the question of good and evil, and of natural catastrophies to be understood and resolved (Iwe 34)

Religion attempts and actually answers some of these questions, thereby providing consolation to man in his confusion it also comforts man in his dilemma. Man accepts the sacred as being real and orients himself towards it and participates in it through rites, ceremonies and codes of conduct (Benton 112; Akpanika 54; Duke 23). These codes give rise to ethics which regulate human behavior and ensures that man behaves well and properly in the society. This makes the society to be disciplined and to possess a standard of morality.

Religion also enhances the socialization and interaction of men with each other. This is confirmed by Emile Durkheim as he states that religion is essentially a social affair. It is a matter of one's membership and participation in religious activities and institutions and finding one's own identity and that of the group in the structures of the religious traditions (Benton 109). This means that religion necessitates one's participation with other adherents of the same religion. This participation and interaction is formalized through institutions like the church, order, sects, temples, fraternities or brotherhood. Membership of these groups gives one a sense of belonging, as members care for one another and help each other in various ways.

Organised religion also contributes to development and progress through the establishment of schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages, rehabilitation centres, leprosy

centres and homes for the aged. They also award scholarships and contribute to some community development projects.

Despite these benefits of religion, it still causes some problems. These occur when some people abuse, misunderstand and apply religion wrongly. These problems are considered below:

b) *Problems of religion*

One major problem of religion is that of fanaticism or fundamentalism. This is the pursuit or practice of religion to such an extreme level that it becomes absurd, irrational, unreasonable and even irreligious. It often results in riots, violence and destructions which fanatics wreck on their victims.

These violence brings about instability and insecurity of life and property. There is distrust and discrimination along religious lines, as some people refuse to cooperate or get along with those who are not in their religious camp (A).

Some people use religion as a means of livelihood, so they refuse to labour for their livelihood, but instead they establish religious groups which will support them. Some others do not participate much in worldly affairs or issues of life, as they believe that the world is coming to an end soon.

In addition to these, religion is unable to solve the world's pressing problems such as poverty, diseases, natural disasters, nuclear threat, pollution, wars, overcrowding and overpopulation. These problems are increasing daily, and due to this, many people have abandoned religion and sought other alternatives which might solve these problems. One of these alternatives is humanism which is examined in the next section.

HUMANISM AS A CATEGORY OF RELIGIOUS ALTERNATIVE

a) *Meaning of humanism*

Encyclopedia Britannica defines humanism as the attitude of mind which attaches primary importance to man and to his faculties, affairs, temporal aspirations and wellbeing (Benton, vol 11, 825). Chambers defines it as a non-religious system of thought which holds that man alone can decide what is or is not correct moral behavior (Kirkpatrick 348)

These two definitions show that it begins and ends with human beings on the physical realm. It is materialistic and projects man above the spiritual. Nothing positive is said about the spiritual, sacred, the soul or the eschatology. Furthermore, humanism does not quite concern itself with the fundamental issues of life which are tackled by religion.

Humanism deals mainly with the present life and man's affairs, whereas religion goes beyond it into the supernatural, eschatology and the hereafter. An examination of some selected humanistic and social theories will illustrate this.

b) *Maxism (Meaning)*

Marxism, whose chief proponent is Karl Marx, is based on the doctrine of opposites, which holds that everything contains two main opposing forces, one is the thesis, and the other is the antithesis (Bassey, 1551). These two forces destroy each other, but from the destruction arises a new situation which is called a synthesis. Eventually this also breaks down into its opposites and a new thesis and antithesis emerges. Then out of these opposing forces a new synthesis arises. This cycle continues endlessly. Marxism uses this idea to illustrate that communism is ethically superior to all other previously existing societies (Popkin 83).

According to them, the historical king – state society broke down into its opposites – the king rulers and the slaves. From the struggle between these two groups, a synthesis in the form of a feudalistic state emerged. Feudalism too broke into the groups of the Lords and the serfs, and this struggle, synthesized into capitalism. They now claim that capitalism has broken down into its opposites – the employers and the employees who are struggling with each other. This will finally result in a revolution and the final elimination of classes, and the means of production will be owned by the state or workers. In that situation, there will be no more oppression, but everyone will be equal (Popkin 83).

Merits of Marxism as a Religious Alternative

Marxism could fulfill some religious functions if it is properly examined and applied. The doctrine of opposites in Marxism is applicable in all religions. All religions identify the good and the evil. They distinguish the sacred and the mundane, the divine and the natural. These sets of pairs are constantly opposed to each other and there is the hope of the good eliminating the evil and establishing a new order. For instance in Christianity, it is believed that God will abolish the present evil world order and establish a new kingdom. Therefore Marxism has provided an alternative to this in the doctrine of opposites and the hope of the future establishment of a classless society. In this sense, it offers the hope of a future salvation just as many religions do.

Marxism also totally condemns oppression and inequality, it advocates fairness and equality. This is the basis of the revolution and the abolition of the exploitative class. Such a revolution will result in the workers owning the means of production. This means that those who produce the wealth actually own it. The same fairness, equality and justice is advocated by many religions, and Christianity teaches that a man reaps what

he sows. This parallels the ownership of wealth by the workers who produce it, according to Marxism. This means that they reap what they planted, which is a religious principle.

Demerits as a Religious Alternative

Marxism has failed to perform many of the functions of religion in spite of the foregoing. For instance, it says nothing about the origin of man, the universe, life, the cosmos and other fundamental issues of life which are bothering mankind. On the other hand, it merely concerns itself with materialistic issues which are limited to this life. It does not provide answers to man's fate after this life. It does not solve the problems facing man in the world. In the socialist – Marxists societies, there is still inequality between the rulers and the ruled. In the communist Soviet Union before the disintegration, the communist party controlled the power. It was a dictator which oppressed the citizens, this situation is also applicable in other socialist communities. They tend towards a dictatorship of the state which is represented by the party. In such a situation, there is no fairness in practice, it only exists in theory.

Socialism/Marxism has not improved the overall economy of its adherents in the long run. Example is the former Soviet Union which has since disintegrated. Therefore Marxist socialism has not contributed to the spiritual or immaterial wellbeing of man, neither has it provided adequate solutions to the economic and physical problems of man.

UTILITARIANISM

Meaning: It is an attempt to lay down an objective principle for determining when a given action is right or wrong (Popkin 33). It further explains that an action is right if it tends to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. If it does not, then it is wrong. If an action produces an excess of beneficial effects over harmful ones, then it is not right (Popkin 34).

Merits of utilitarianism as a religious alternative: Utilitarianism acknowledges the existence of good and bad, right and wrong actions. It set up a standard of determining right and wrong, which is based on the consequences of one's action. It seeks after the happiness and welfare of the majority, this is similar to what many religions offer such as wellbeing, good health, solutions to problems and prosperity gospel in Christianity.

Demerits of utilitarianism as a religious alternative: It is materialistic, devoid of spiritual solutions to man's problems. It cannot account for the source of the principle with which it measures the rightness or wrongness of an act. Moreover, what makes

people happy is not necessarily good for them. Many religions do not aim at man's happiness in this age or life, rather they aim for his salvation through means that may be very painful.

Hence, utilitarianism cannot fully solve man's problems. It is ridiculous to measure right and wrong actions by the happiness of the majority. For example, many people may enjoy drinking much alcohol, but that does not make it right.

PLATONISM

Meaning: This theory states that evil is due to lack of knowledge. If a man can discover what is right, he will never act wickedly. In order to discover what is right or good, men must be schooled in various disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy, in order to acquire certain kinds of knowledge (Popkin 3).

However, Plato accepted that it is possible for some people to lead the good life without possessing knowledge, but they will be doing so haphazardly or blindly. Hence he suggested that such people should be trained morally, so that they can imitate those who have knowledge of the good and who can act virtuously (Popkin 3).

Another major issue in Platonism is that there is only one good life for all men to lead because goodness is not dependent on men's inclinations, desires and wishes. It exists independently of men and remains to be discovered if men can be properly trained (Popkin 4).

Merits of Platonism as a Religious Alternative

Platonism accepts the existence of good and evil, right and wrong. It also seeks for the good by suggesting ways of attaining it. This is through the acquisition of knowledge. It also acknowledges the existence of an absolute good which is a supreme and independent standard of judging man's actions. This could be regarded as a type of god in Platonism. It sets a goal which man should work towards. This knowledge of right and wrong is necessary for the peaceful existence of the society. These functions are also performed by religion.

Demerits of Platonism as A Religious Alternative

Its conception of what is good or evil is vague and unclear. It has not stated the source or basis of this good. His argument that a knowledge of the good which comes through education, will enable men to act properly, is not quite practicable because there are many educated people who are evil and corrupt. Hence knowledge cannot quite eliminate evil acts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The foregoing reveals that religion has caused some problems such as fanaticism, riots, violence and discriminations, yet its benefits appear to outweigh these. It provides answers to the problems of man's existence, his origin, destination, the meaning and purpose of suffering. It also considers the three dimensions of man, his body, soul and spirit, their interrelationship with each other and their welfare. These functions are not properly considered in humanism as indicated by the theories examined above.

Humanism rather concerns itself with how to improve the society and the welfare of man in this life. Many of its suggestions are impracticable and unable to improve man's physical condition. It completely neglects the soul and spirit of man, says nothing about the origin and destination of man after this life, whereas religion concerns itself with these in addition to man's physical wellbeing.

Religion introduces the element of the divine or supernatural into the human society. It is assumed that this supernatural element can solve the problems of man which are beyond him. On the other hand, humanism which is based only on human abilities and standards, is inadequate because man is imperfect. He cannot fully adopt the ideal concepts advocated by humanism. Nevertheless, humanism is devoid of the problems associated with religion such as fanaticism, violence, rioting, discrimination and isolation.

On the basis of these arguments, the reader may be more enlightened to choose which of these two options, is suitable and more beneficial to him.

WORKS CITED

- Akpanika, Ekpenyong Nyong. "Religious and Political Crises in Nigeria: A Historical Exploration." (2017).
- Bassey, Samuel Akpan. "Karl Marx Alienation and the Nigerian Workers." *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR)* 8th ser 2 (2016): 1550-555.
- Benton, William (Ed.) *Encyclopaedia Britannica Vols 11&19 Chicago: A society of gentlemen in Scotland*, 1971.
- Duke, Emmanuel Orok. "The Relevance of Pusey's Eirenicon Today: Intercommunion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics." *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 14.1 (2017): 138-156.
- Iwe, N. S. S. The dignity of man as the foundation of human rights'. *Academic Digest* Vol. 1, No. 2, May-June 1990. Port Harcourt: Pinnacle Publishing Co.
- Kirkpatrick, E. M. *Chambers Universal Learners Dictionary*. Edinburg: W & R. Chambers, 1985
- Popkin, Richard & Avrum Sholl. *Philosophy made simple*. London: Heinemann, 1981.