

The Decline of Dominant Humanism

Hamidreza Ayatollahy
Professor of Philosophy Department
Allameh Tabataba'ii University

Abstract:

There were some historical, cultural and philosophical situations after renaissance that made humanism dominated in Western thought. Humanism is different from atheism. Most of humanist thinkers have been believing in God but the Lord-ness of God is denied by them. I am going to clarify the motivations for up growing humanism from sixteenth century until second half of twentieth century. Some Christian doctrines made humanism more natural and then they simplified secularism as the main idea for a developed country.

I am going to state the differences between Islam and Christianity by that there are serious challenges between Islam and humanism and secularism. It was Islamic revolution in Iran by Imam Khomeini that retreated humanism as the spirit of secularism and materialism. The rejection of traditional meaning of theocentrism and Imam Khomeini's new idea of theocentrism brought about a situation that can be called as decline of humanism. I am going to state the new situation of divine presence in our social and individual life nowadays and the challenges of humanism for imposing its values.

Mankind has been the central issue in Western thought specially philosophy. But there were two approaches in this regard before and after renaissance. In middle ages, it was considered in anthropocentrism. The man in anthropocentric thought was the core of universe and all other things were created for his benefits. There are varieties of beings in the world but man's value is above them. The

centricity of the earth among all other stars, which was the previous account of cosmology, along with the view of servitude of other animals and plants for him were considered as some signs for this anthropocentrism.

The rejection of centricity of the earth by some astronomers and scientist in renaissance, like Kepler, Copernicus and Galileo, paved the pad for another kind of thinking about situation of man in the universe. The earth became a small planet in great solar system which is a very small part of a small galaxy. He is alone in the universe and there is no meaning of centricity of the earth for the entire universe.

In the other side, the previous assumption of man, neglected the power of man for using technology in his service. The Newtonian discoveries of laws of nature and thinking of Francis Bacon's method in using those discoveries only for the man's service gave the man another role in the universe. Although he is alone and is a very very small part of the world but he can predominate all other things in the world by his own activities not based on some other things. He could have an active role in the universe instead of being a passive spectator in the world.

All of these matters brought a new viewpoint about man and his position in the universe in the modern age. He became the criteria for other beings in the world. Therefore the anthropocentric view changed for the humanistic approach to the world.

Descartes has been nominated as the founder of modern philosophy. His philosophy introduced the most important base of humanism. He, in his famous starting point, namely "*Cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I exist) gave priority to human's mind; and the existence and validity of our knowledge of outward world must be proved through and after that "I". The world must not be considered as being that contains man kind. The real world is based on our cognition of it. It is me who gave the validity of other beings. Epistemology is prior to ontology. The world in itself changed to the world for me. Human subject gives meaning to the objects. Truth from my own point of view has been the successor of objective

truth as a constant value. Subjectivism became the essential character of modern philosophy; and it brought humanism as philosophical and practical attitude of modern age.

Humanism means that man is the criteria of truthfulness of other things and he does not need any other thing as well as God for this validity. In humanistic approach, God is not the absolute truth of all things but He must be proved by my own reason and then He will be a truth but on my assumption. Descartes tried to prove God after proving his own existence through his mind, and afterward through his mind and God, the existence of the outward objects. He needed God for validating the existence of things based on his cognition of them.

On the other hand, the protestant movement caused the power of church, for interventions in politics, economy and social laws, to be in question. There were a lot of evidences for prevention of the church from scientific development. Therefore, Western man believed in the advantages of separation of the state and the church. This was humanism that theoretically personalized Divine presence in man's life.

The major thinkers in early modern period did believe in God and they tried to prove God through their developments in science and philosophy; but they neglected the role of God in their social and political life. That is, the existence and presence of God in individual man were believed but the Lord-ness of God in guiding man in all parts of his life was rejected.

As this separated God had little rooms for attendance, atheistic attacks to this God were easier. Therefore, in nineteenth centuries, we encountered some serious attack not only on Lordness of God but also His existence at all. God moved to temples among some so called undeveloped religious peoples. So that, in 1960s, the famous journal of *Times* wrote on his cover that "God has no room to present". Although humanists do not necessarily believe in atheism but their movement lead to ignorance of God. Humanists could only believe in a personalized message of God. All this process increasingly made humanism as a dominant attitude of

Western people. Man supposed that he can understand truths in the world on his scientific progress. The science was the replacement of God. Technology, also, gave him the power on his own. He supposed that he has been the main source of knowledge and power. This was the peak of humanism.

Some Signs for the Insufficiency of Humanism

1- At the second half of twentieth century, the philosophical researches showed that science can not be the criteria of truth, because the truthfulness of science was under serious question. Science, just by that view which gave subjectivity to God, viewed subjectively and his objective truth denied. This is our (scientists') mind that in some circumstances accepts one scientific law and in other circumstances denies it. The acceptance and denial of a scientific law is not based on reality but on human choice. This deep understanding of science posed the suspicion of realness of science which was the most important criteria for sufficiency of man's knowledge.

2- In other side, the independent power of man by technology was another side of humanism. While the twentieth century was a century of development in science and technology for human kind to use their capacity in serving man, the twenty first century is a century with a lot of suspicion to this kind of human activities because of all disasters they brought for human kind by their technological developmentⁱ. Thus, the twenty first century is named as the century of environment. This new approach brings bioethics in the core of scientific and technological circles. Because of insufficiency of secular bioethics, the need for religions has been more and more important in this century for removing environmental pollutions that have made by human vanity. Professor Nasr has analyzed the matter and the role of religions in helping humanity for the best solution in his book *Religion and the Order of Nature*. He emphasizes in this book that the most capacity in this respect can be found in Abrahamic religions especially in Islam. The problem and dangers of pollution made by a secular

science and technology based on human autonomy in interfering in the nature, and the emergency of a solution have been in the center of scientific and technological circles. Therefore the necessity of solution has shown the weaknesses of humanistic solutions which brought those huge troubles and the need for a sacred science. It can be a time for religions to introduce themselves as savoir of humanity.

3- The secular humanistic thought that defends of separation of religion and the state has tried to introduce some alternatives for religious state like socialism, democracy and liberal democracy and so on. But these kinds of political systems have had a lot of problems that are pointed by political philosophers. Marxism was also a kind of those models of modernity that in a long period of time in twentieth century could attract huge number of peoples in the world as the best kind of the state but its collapse from political discourse showed the deficiency of those secular solutions. In an examination of liberal democracy by contemporary scholars the consequences of those liberal democracies in the future may be more problematic than Marxism. American militarism in recent years made liberal democracy as the enemy of human kind. The existence of Israel and its huge governmental crimes, and also imperialistic militarism and nuclearism of United States is supported by liberal democracy of Western countriesⁱⁱ.

4- In reality, the humanistic achievements of western modern political thought brought the biggest disasters in human history, namely the world war one and two. Although the western modern people reject those kinds of political

systems like fascism and racism and Nazism, they can not ignore the secular humanistic basis of those systems. The secular solution of the state may cause those tragedies that may be the result of its secularity and it is not rational to rely unconsciously on those treatments.

The second Phase of Decline of Humanism

These signs were the first phase of decline of humanism. The unique discourse of the world, until middle of twentieth century, was humanistic one either in Marxism or in liberalism or other models of ruling world. The least importance of religion in dominant discourse of human social activities did not pay any attention to theocentrism.

It was Imam Khomeini who brought religion in the core of social discourse. Humanism had some challenges in itself without any one outward. But the whole humanism encountered a powerful new challenge of theocentrism which was quite different from that one in Middle age. All kinds of Divine presence, increasingly, begun to appear in human life. The great movement of Iranian revolution, ruled by Imam Khomeini, changed all the criteria of humanism which was dominant for more than three centuries. This huge shock was the most important phase of decline of humanism. Although a lot of religious movements were not in the direct of Imam Khomeini's path, they have the similarity of rejecting secular humanism. They emphasized on the need for presence of religious teachings in most dimensions of human life.

This was because, the increasing tendencies and inclinations to religions specially in recent decades have made the religious discourse in the core of human lifeⁱⁱⁱ while religions in the middle of twentieth century was in the margin. This is not restricted to a personally religious activity but is going to penetrate all dimensions of human life; it is going to requisite a need for social and political attendance of religions.

The other challenge of Imam Khomeini with humanistic approach of the West was the challenge of best way of life. While in Western culture the best way of life depend on welfare and humanistic freedom, this is not so with Islamic system of value. The importance of spiritual progress of man kind and defining him as who must think of himself as spiritual animal which will be possible in his worshipping God brought a religious worldview quite different from a Western concern. The emphasis of religious teachings to heavenly essence of man and the duty of prophets to purify him toward training that essence (*Tazkiah*) as well as its emphasis on mundane matters have brought different system of value from a Western one in which the definition of the best way of life is restricted to the best material life manifested in those material welfare and freedom. For example, homosexuality rejected in all its kind in Islam because it makes man very far from its true life, while in a Western system of value it is in the direction of human enjoyment and a kind of his welfare and freedom. Homosexuality in an Islamic system of value is just like terrorism in a Western one. The judgment about one

action due to two systems of value is quite different because the different definition of man kind.

The decision about a successful and fruitful political system hardly based on the system of values and the definition of man and his ideals in which we are going to judge about. Therefore, we may not judge about development absolutely in a Western manner of life; perhaps some of those developments are decline than improvement.

This is the sovereignty of mass media ruled by Western secular humanistic regimes that try to impose its system of value that is made for the benefits of Western companies.

At the end I must add another important point. Theocentrism which has been offered by Imam Khomeini was very different from that one in Middle Ages. Imam Khomeini's theocentrism is not intervention of religion and religious leaders in all political and social deeds. It respects all rational solution of man but they must be in the direction of the religious teachings. Every political and social attitude emphasize on some boundaries that define it as that attitude. These boundaries in Imam Khomeini's view must be defined by religious teachings but in those boundaries human kind must think and give solution on his own rationality. This is also a religious teaching. The religion must protect of human values based on divine guidance. The characteristic of this kind of theocentrism must be explored in another paper.

Hamidreza Ayatollahy (PhD)
Professor, Department of Philosophy,
Allameh Tabataba'ii University, Faculty of Literature,
Chamran Freeway, Modiriyyat Bridge, Allameh Street,
19816, Tehran, Iran (Or: P.O.Box: Iran, Tehran, 15875/4381)
Fax: (0098-21) 88694661 **Tel:** (0098-21) 88681887
E-mail: hamidreza.ayatollahy@philosophy.ox.ac.uk and hamidayat@gmail.com
Website: <http://www.ayatollahy.net/>

ⁱ - Peccei, A. *The Chasm Ahead*. London: Macmillan. 1969; Commoner, B. *The Closing Circle: Confronting the Environmental Crisis*; Meadows D. H & others, *Beyond the Limits: a Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future*.

ⁱⁱ - Ayatollahy, Hamidreza "The Relation between Religion and the State: an Islamic Point of View" in *Journal of Sh'a Islamic Studies*, Volume 1, Number 2, April 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ - Voll believes that Islam will be as an active solution of the political presence in its territory. See: Voll, John O., *Islam Continuity and Change in the Modern World*. p357.