



Special Feature:

A Humanism for the Catholic University of Eastern Africa

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Introduction

Believe me or not, I've never yet been to a psychiatrist. However, I once dreamt that I had enough money for the professional fee and that I introduced myself as the person who had made the appointment then settled down to have my inferiority complex analysed. When the fee was nearly used up (though it was I who had done almost all the talking), the learned doctor told me that he had both good news and bad news for me. "The good news," he said, "is that you have no inferiority complex. The bad news is that you *are* inferior".

The task to make a presentation on *humanism* makes me acutely aware of the "bad news". Under the circumstances, the best I can do is draw from the psychiatrist in my dreams and relate what I say to concrete facts.

The word 'humanism' is used in a variety of senses. I think I can somewhat simplify the situation as follows:

(a) 'Humanism' is used to refer to a *belief system* about the dignity of human persons and their ability to achieve their goals by appropriate means. This afternoon, I am not primarily interested in such philosophical kinds of Humanism. Let me state explicitly that I disagree with the variety of it that attributes to human beings the ability to achieve all their goals without the need for God or religion.

(b) 'Humanism' is also used to refer to an *attitude* of respect for anything that is of genuinely human value. I'll try to concentrate on this, because it enables me to speak about Humanism with only minimal jargon, and because in general it seems much easier.

It is this attitude of respect for the human person that we can see clear traces of at CUEA and that the university can further aim at as a programme for the new century. I hope, however, that you don't expect me to give a comprehensive picture of it. It is, in fact, something I've never myself seen in its totality. I'll try to mention a number of characteristic features of it that a

programme of university education should be interested in. In Part Two of this presentation, I should then be able to add some more general reflections.

Part One

One feature of Humanism is that exemplified in the members and sympathisers of FOGEE, who emphasize respect for the female as an equal to the male person in education. As a male head in a Department with a majority of female students, I've often wondered how long the absence of an acceptable gender balance can continue. To put it differently, it seems obvious to me that the 21st century will witness notable changes in this area of gender balance, and that FOGEE is reminding us at the outset of the century of a necessary element of Humanism that should increasingly characterize a university like CUEA.

I also see an element of Humanism in the thoughtfulness of the Marketing Students Association (MSA), who have put up garbage cans all over the campus. A similar respect for the CUEA community is shown by the many students who use those garbage cans – just as its absence is glaring in the carelessness of some students who leave paper plates with soggy remains of potato chips and banana peelings in lecture rooms (of all places!). The ecology should become a common concern among intellectuals, and that should be visible here at CUEA. If, after leaving the university, our graduates are to contribute in significant ways to the welfare of their cities and nations, the example of MSA should be emulated by all before graduation as a CUEA tradition.

Respect for the human person must of necessity reveal itself as respect for the handicapped and suffering. I find it difficult to gauge how much of this there is among us at CUEA. From time to time however, I hear or read about collections followed by visits to Nyumbani or other places where the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) and other groups show their sensitivity to suffering. I find this very heartening. I look upon it as something that should stand out in a university's culture, particularly a Christian one such as ours. Allow me to quote here the beautiful opening sentence of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution "On the Church in the Modern World".

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts (G&S, No. 1).

Subsequently, the text refers to the growing "sense of autonomy and responsibility" everywhere, with a great potential for "the spiritual and moral maturity of mankind". In that context, the Council says that we "are witnessing the birth of a new humanism, where human beings are defined before all else by their responsibility to their fellow human beings and at the court of history". (No. 55)

This perspective of a worldwide humanism may raise the question whether instances of behaviour in our CUEA campus are more than mere trivialities that belong to the world of the petty-minded. I would like to answer that thoughtful behaviour deriving from respect for one another can never be merely trivial. Lecturers who, out of respect for a colleague waiting outside, always make it a point to clean the blackboard before leaving the lecture room, or students who enjoy an all-night disco in this hall without mounting amplifiers outside my bedroom, must be assumed to be generally thoughtful and humanists all in macro-contexts. Similarly, people who are careless and lack punctuality in college can be expected to be equally unconcerned and inconsiderate when they are let loose upon the world. Things become worse, of course, if an educational institution allows dishonest and corrupt habits to develop unchecked.

This brings me to two other prominent features of Humanism, namely respect for self and concern for freedom. I take it for granted that education always implies some kind of tension between the legitimate guidance that is offered (commonly in a context of large numbers when some adjustment to the group is required on the part of the individual) and the equally legitimate concern for the free development of the individual. True self-respect is basically justified by the fact that I know myself to be a person like others around me (irrespective of bank account, academic titles, skin pigmentation or other superficial differences). My own freedom, like that of others, is sacred and needs to be treasured. Yet how can I claim to respect myself as a person if I am not prepared to listen to advice about developing my talents through hard work? Or how can I claim to be free if I allow myself to become the slave of money-making activities, of pleasure, of power? Can I have true self-respect as a student if I am interested in easy results and cheap degrees as substitutes for serious study? I know, of course, that many of our present generation students at CUEA can't afford to be too idealistic and want to get a degree as soon as possible. However, they should not forget that a degree obtained without self-respect will never give them the satisfaction and inspiration that they look forward to with even greater eagerness than the degree by itself. More generally, an attitude of Humanism, steadily cultivated during one's education, will bring its own precious reward.

A very basic feature of a humanistic attitude is that of an openness to truth which goes together with tolerance of views different from your own. The

more you think about that in the modern world (with its incidences of racial, ethnic, tribal and religious intolerance here in Africa, for instance), the more you realize how important it is that a programme of education includes education in tolerance and full acceptance of others. What a wonderful thing it would be if all the CUEA graduates would stand out as promoters of inter-tribal harmony and cooperation! Even if it is true that education is largely a matter of self-education, the development of one's insights and attitudes needs to be stimulated by a congenial atmosphere. A good educational institution will provide this, but it can't become an effective educational tool unless students (individually and as a body) are interested in it and prepared to collaborate.

I know that my attitude of Humanism leaves very much to be desired. However, it is very clear to me that religion must form an essential element in it. I respect the view of people who say that they don't need God or religion, but in my own life that is unthinkable. I am convinced that God respects my neighbour and me - though I am not always consciously aware of it. This belief does in fact motivate my respect for the human person. Again, Jesus Christ is the model human being, the Second Adam according to the New Testament. Therefore, I can't be concerned about the welfare of human family merely on the basis of reason and accepted human values. My Christian faith is not only a fact I must take into account, but also a reality I highly value. Whatever it may be for others, a humanism without reference to Jesus Christ would clash with self-respect.

Part Two

It would be foolish to think of a humanistic attitude as the prerogative of Christians or of a Catholic institution. It isn't merely some kind of Christian ethics. Daily experiences show that I have learned and must continue to do so from non-Catholics and non-Christians. I'll always remain very grateful, for instance, for my 15 years in India, which provided the opportunity to become acquainted with the Hindu tradition(s) and its values. Among other things, it forced me to reflect on the enrichment that I experienced from my contact with Hinduism, and therefore to reflect on my own academic and spiritual duty to seek such enrichment. More particularly, I often recall an interesting allegorical interpretation of a Bible passage that I had come across in my earlier studies of Christian literature.

The interpretation goes back to a 3rd century north-African scholar, Origen of Alexandria, and it can be looked upon as an early form of what today is often referred to as religious inculturation, that is, being aware of the goodness

inherent in non-Christian culture(s) and making it an integral part of one's Christian life. Origen saw this exemplified in a passage from the Book of Exodus.

The Egyptians urged the people on, to hasten their departure from the land; they thought that otherwise they would all die ... The Israelites did as Moses had commanded: they asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord indeed had made the Egyptians so well-disposed towards the people that they let them have whatever they asked for. Thus did they despoil the Egyptians. (Ex 12:33-36)

It was this despoliation of the Egyptians, says Origen, which later enabled the Israelites to construct the sanctuary with all its golden and silver vessels as described towards the end of the Book of Exodus. The wealth of the pagans was used to enrich the worship of the true God. This leads Origen to the following conclusion:

Now, Holy Scripture is wont to represent as an evil the descent of the Israelites into Egypt, indicating that certain persons suffer harm from sojourning among the Egyptians, that is to say, from meddling with the knowledge of this world ... And I may tell you from my own experience that not many take from Egypt only the useful and go away and use for the service of God (Letter to St. Gregory Thaumaturgus)

The gold and silver the Egyptians, therefore, become symbols for their secular knowledge and cultural achievements, and these are in turn seen to represent the secular knowledge and achievements of the Gentile world in general, which are all meant to become integrated elements in a believer's world view and attitude.

Over a century after Origen's death, St Gregory of Nyssa repeated this in slightly different words in his *Life of Moses*. He added explicitly that "it is possible to see this happening even now. For many bring to the Church of God their profane learning as a kind of gift." (Bk II, No. 116)

More than a thousand years later (1501 to be precise) Erasmus of Rotterdam used the same reasoning in his *Manual of the Christian Soldier*. As one of the chief advocates of religious reform through solid education, he too defended a positive (though by no means indiscriminate) evaluation of secular learning. He looked upon it as one of the neutral means (together with health, beauty, strength and such like things) to a better life – neutral in the sense that, depending on how it is made use of, it may have a positive effect on the Christian. In his own words:

If you seek erudition that, aided by it, you may more clearly perceive Christ shining forth in sound literature ..., then prepare yourself for the study of literature ... If you can confidently look forward to great profit in Christ, (then) like an adventurous merchant boldly proceed further to learning of the Gentiles, and use the riches or treasures of the Egyptians for the adornment

of the temple of God. (Ch. 8, Rule 4)

Though secular university studies (or any secular studies, for that matter) can of course be justified in other ways, I have always liked this image of "the treasures of the Egyptians" because it is suggestive of the contribution those studies can make to the Christian life of intellectuals.

Erasmus represented a movement in European history that took from the old classical Greek and Latin writers an image of the human person as both learned and morally responsible. The characteristics of the movements have always remained somewhat vague, and so has the name which was given to it, that is, 'Humanism'. Speaking very generally, we can say that a humanist was considered to be a person of wide culture and erudition, tolerant, and with a positive belief in the dignity and potentiality of the human person. For many contemporaries of Erasmus, the belief in the importance of the human person came under attack from the teaching of the Polish cleric Copernicus, whose heliocentric astronomy implied that human life wasn't after all the center of the universe. We could say that the attack was intensified through the teaching of the 19th century naturalist Charles Darwin that the human species doesn't have a privileged origin, and further in the 20th century through the psychology of Freud, in whose system the primacy of human reason and consciousness (with implied accountability) seemed to be replaced by the primary of the unconscious.

In any case, by the time of the Second Vatican Council some 35 years ago, Humanism had had for some time bad press coverage. Its idealistic image of the human person might indeed look utterly unrealistic in times of repeated genocide. Human self-respect inevitably suffers from widespread unemployment and a painful struggle for life. The tolerance of the humanist may easily look like a lack of principle and rootedness. The erudite culture of the humanist may well see meaningless as specialization in the various branches of knowledge continues to increase and to preclude an accessible synthesis that puts everything neatly in its place.

The Vatican Council's reference to a "new" Humanism must be interpreted against this background. It implies that, in spite of everything, the Catholic Church believes in the future of our race, and it invites the whole human race to share that belief and to look at things through Christian eyes. Especially since the 19th century, Humanism has often been presented as anti-religious, as a view which held that human beings can't achieve their full potential unless they free themselves from religion. In this respect, the Humanism proposed by the Council was something new. It wanted to re-emphasize the dignity of the human person but now on the basis of Christian faith. It repeated the positive appreciation of the non-theological sciences as constantly found in the older tradition of Humanism. It updated the social challenges of Humanism by reminding us that human beings have

increasingly become each other's neighbours. It would seem to suggest that a synthesis of all the sciences should be sought, not so much in detailed familiarity with the research findings of each branch of knowledge, but rather in the shared attitude of a Christian Humanism.

In the earlier part of this presentation, I have tried to give some simple examples which enable us to cultivate a humanistic attitude in our everyday campus life. In the second part, I have looked at Humanism from a wider perspective, keeping in mind that our university aims to make the 'new' Humanism its general educational goal.