



## EXPLORING BLACK HUMANISM THROUGH A HUMANISTIC LENS

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### **Abstract:**

African-American humanism has an origin different from the Renaissance Humanism and the Enlightenment. Some ideas from these may be reflected in African-American humanistic thought. It shares the values and ethical principles with other humanist groups but with a special emphasis on certain issues pertaining specifically to the needs and concerns of the people of Black race. Since, for people of color, a major reason for their suffering is a result of the racist structures of the society therefore a special kind of humanism is called for, one that takes into account the suffering of those who experience oppression and marginalization namely African American humanism or Black Humanism. Black humanism is not just the humanism of people who are of African descent. It is a different theological tradition that emanated from the African American experience.

### **Exploring Black Humanism through a Humanistic Lens:**

Humanism, as a concept, carries a range of meanings and interpretations. Scholars trace the origins of humanism back to Greece in the fifth century B.C., particularly to Protagoras, the philosopher who introduced the notion that humans are the "measure of all things." However, the term "humanism" itself was not used by Renaissance thinkers; it was coined in the nineteenth century by German scholar F.J. Niethammer, who applied it to the study of classical Greek and Latin texts, which had gained significant popularity in educational institutions. Etymologically, the roots of the term can be traced to ancient times, where figures such as the Roman philosopher Cicero referred to "studia humanitatis" and "litterae humaniores" to describe an education focused on classical literature, including grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.

In essence, humanism refers to the study of the humanities-fields like grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy-which formed the intellectual backbone of early modern Europe. During the Renaissance, humanism also involved the revival and celebration of the culture and institutions of classical antiquity, alongside a desire to restore them in the present day. It represented a movement that aimed to communicate new knowledge and insights through reform in educational practices, better textual scholarship, and intellectual discourse, often in academies, universities, and informal settings. A key aspect of Renaissance humanism was its approach to these subjects through critical inquiry, challenging the intellectual authority traditionally held by the Roman Catholic Church.

From the early fourteenth century onwards, several Italian scholars, poets, ecclesiastics, lawyers, and officials can be regarded as humanists, according to this definition. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as interest in reviving ancient culture as a model for contemporary life grew, humanists began to study and teach Latin and Greek texts. The prominent authors of the time included Cicero, Horace, Homer, Sophocles, and Thucydides. The humanist curriculum, therefore, was focused on language, literature, and history, rather than philosophical problems that fell outside the scope of moral philosophy. This movement, marked by a renewed focus on Classical thought, is known as the Renaissance, or more specifically, the Italian Renaissance, which spanned from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, beginning primarily in Florence, Italy.

The ideas of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers became central to intellectual inquiry during the Renaissance, leading to a broader range of knowledge that eventually extended beyond Christian theology. Renaissance humanism can thus be seen as a rejection of the otherworldliness emphasized by medieval Christianity. It also represented a revolt against the authority of the Catholic Church and the religious restrictions placed on knowledge. A growing reliance on reason, as opposed to faith, became a defining trend of the period.

Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, in his influential work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), argued that the Italian Renaissance marked the end of the medieval political world. The decline of feudalism in Italy led to the emergence of independent city-states, characterized by a rejection of feudal customs and privileges. Burckhardt suggested that the new political order in these city-states was based on reflection and calculation rather than religious or medieval traditions. He also proposed that the Italian Renaissance witnessed the birth of "modern man"-a rational, individualistic figure, distinct from the collective identity of the medieval period. This concept of the Renaissance "man" as an individual with diverse talents became one of the defining characteristics of the era.

Humanism has developed into a philosophy that emphasizes the recognition of human nature, its limitations, and its interests. It celebrates the value and dignity of individuals, placing them at the center of all things. Broadly speaking, humanism believes that the proper focus of study is mankind itself. Humanists place their faith in humanity, asserting that people have the ability to shape and control their own destinies. Their

concerns are rooted in the tangible world, not the supernatural. Although society is far from achieving an ideal state, humanists argue that through reasoning and diligent effort, individuals can find happiness and fulfillment in the present life. In challenging times, there may be a temptation to seek solace in fantasy or the supernatural, but humanism rejects this tendency, emphasizing that empirical evidence and rational actions define our world. Humanism emphasizes the ethical and social responsibility of individuals to serve others, fostering the well-being of humanity as a whole. By working towards the betterment of all-including oneself and one's community-individuals can enhance their own circumstances. At its core, humanism involves dedicating oneself to the welfare of humanity, rejecting discrimination based on race, nationality, or other divisions, and highlighting the unity of all people. Louis O. Kattsoff, a noted metaphysical thinker, defines humanism in his article "Man is the Measure of all Things" as follows: "Humanism has two major meanings: one is an interest in the classical literature of Greece and Rome, and the other is an interest in man as the center of focus in the world. In the latter sense, the humanist believes that man is the center of all activity, research, production, and truth" (456).

Throughout history, literature has vividly portrayed human existence, and writers have responded to cultural shifts with their philosophical perspectives. The humanist spirit flourished in the works of Renaissance artists like Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, who made man the central subject of their art. By moving away from the abstract theological concerns of the Middle Ages, these artists focused on human achievements and explored humanity's role in the divine order. Writers and thinkers such as Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Rousseau interpreted humanism with keen insights and profound analyses.

Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, presents one of the most memorable reflections on the complexities of human nature: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! ... In action how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!" (40). Similarly, the eighteenth-century writer Alexander Pope's *Essays on Man* offers a powerful humanist declaration: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan/The proper study of mankind is man" (37).

In the nineteenth century William Blake by writing his poem "Milton" too became an inspiration for the Humanist:

I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In England's green and pleasant land. (2)

Percy Bysshe Shelley startled the literary world by writing "The Necessity of Atheism," "Queen Mab" and "Prometheus Unbound" criticizing supernaturalism and the evils of Christianity. Through these works Shelley conveys the idea that man remains in thralldom as a nonexistent being until he takes his destiny into his hands.

German writer Goethe gave expression to humanistic perspective through his unparalleled works especially *Faust* which reaffirms the liberating spirit of humanism. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England, George Eliot, Edward Fitzgerald, Algernon Charles Swinburne, William Morris, and in 20<sup>th</sup> century writers like Thomas Hardy and H.G. Wells carried the humanist tradition. Edward Fitzgerald, in his translated poem "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," (originally written by Omar Khayyam) scoffs at the idea of an after-life existence by saying:

Oh, threats of Hell and hopes of Paradise!  
One thing atleast is certain-This Life flies;  
One thing is certain and the rest is lies;  
The Flower that once has blown for ever dies. (55)

In the United States Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ernest Hemingway and Mark Twain conveyed their humanistic leanings through their works. In Afro-American literature Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. DuBois, Philip Randolph, Richard Wright and many others contributed their efforts to present ordinary people with the notion that human beings have endless possibilities.

African-American humanism has an origin different from the Renaissance Humanism and the Enlightenment. Some ideas from these may be reflected in African-American humanistic thought. It shares the values and ethical principles with other humanist groups but with a special emphasis on certain issues pertaining specifically to the needs and concerns of the people of Black race. Since, for people of color, a major reason for their suffering is a result of the racist structures of the society therefore a special kind of humanism is called for, one that takes into account the suffering of those who experience oppression and marginalization namely African American humanism or Black Humanism. Black humanism is not just the humanism of people who are of African descent. It is a different theological tradition that emanated from the African American experience. Anthony Pinn, an American Professor, author, and public intellectual working at the intersections of African-American religion and humanist thought in *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* (2001), a book edited by him, argues that it has five basic principles, some of which it shares with humanism at large and some of which are unique.

These principles are: (1) understanding of humanity as fully (and solely) accountable and responsible for the human condition and the correction of its plight; (2) suspicion toward or rejection of supernatural explanation and claims . . . (3) an appreciation for African American cultural production and a perception of traditional forms of black religiosity as having cultural importance as opposed to any type of 'cosmic' authority; (4) a commitment to individual and societal transformation; (5) a controlled optimism that recognizes both human potential and human destructive activities. (10)

Maulana Karenga, an African-American Professor of Africana studies, author and activist, reflects upon the humanistic principles and defines the duties of those who are involved in the Black Liberation struggle in his seminal work *Kawaida and the Question of Life and Struggle* (2008), saying that they must show a profound and ongoing commitment to (1) the dignity and rights of human persons; (2) the well-being and flourishing of family and community; (3) the integrity and value of the environment; (4) the reciprocal solidarity and cooperation for mutual benefit of humanity. (268)

Valeria G. Harvell in "Afrocentric Humanism and African American Women's Humanizing Activism" contends that there are many different aspects of humanistic vision some of which are: (a) The sacredness of the rights and dignity of all human beings, (b) creating conditions conducive to the development and growth of the whole being, (c) the obligation to ensure the well being and survival of the entire community, (d) the moral imperative to protect the most vulnerable, and (e) the responsibility of each individual to live in harmony and collaboration with other human beings, with nature and with the Spirit. (1059)

So Black Humanism believes in the human capacity to solve individual and social problems and to make progress. It believes that life is an adventurous quest and a continuing search for truth. It lends due importance to the creative imagination as a power in promoting good life as humanists believe that the 'good life' can be achieved on earth through by doing good actions, sharing ideas, positive thinking and enlightened self-interest. They believe that human needs, interest and dignity are fundamental. For humanists, particularly for black humanists, it is the creative imagination that provides hope to alleviate suffering and to make world a better place one must first imagine it. The "map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us" (2) avers Robin Kelly in the work *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002).

Afrocentric scholars have always emphasized the thematic significance of the humanistic viewpoint for the overall liberation struggles of African Americans. Respect for every human being and social solidarity, a keen sense of fraternity and justice coupled with cooperation between men and women are the seminal features of traditional African society. The fundamental principle of humanism is to treat every human being equally. This intrinsic value of humanism is at the core of all social justice movements, though the essential principles defining this humanist outlook have not been specified or described anywhere. Badi Foster, a writer known for his academic and professional achievements and his community work finds humanism, in his article "Towards a Definition of Black Referents," as the "concern for human life in relationship between self and others" where "service to family, clan, community or nation" becomes the defining feature of these interactions (10). Maulana Karenga asserts that "vision" is quite necessary to initiate any social justice movement. He tries to explore the content of this vision and finds that it must be one of a "just and good society and a good and sustainable world, and a dignity affirming concept of man and woman and the future of humanity" (252). This vision must also point to possibilities inherent in the people and the struggle they wage for a new history of humankind. So this is the humanistic perspective that is deeply rooted in the African culture, often delved upon by Afrocentric scholars and writers and consistently demonstrated in black people's thoughts and actions.

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