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Humanist but not Radical: The Educational Philosophy of *Thiruvalluvar Kural*

Devin K. Joshi¹

Abstract

Humanist ideas in education have been promoted by both Western thinkers and classical wisdom texts of Asia. Exploring this connection, I examine the educational philosophy of an iconic ancient Tamil (Indian) text, the *Thiruvalluvar Kural*, by juxtaposing it with a contemporary humanist classic, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As this comparative study reveals, both texts offer humanist visions of relevance to education, politics, and society. Notably, however, the *Kural* takes what might be described as a more mainstream humanist stance vis-à-vis Freire's radical humanist approach. Nevertheless, both educational philosophies share a common humanist bond representing important breakthroughs within their own given contexts. More specifically, the *Kural* supports a shift in consciousness and social practices away from caste rigidity, superstition, and pre-humanist beliefs while Freire championed transitioning from rigid, top-down and alienating educational delivery models and economic systems to learning processes and societies that are more democratized, dialogic and egalitarian.

Keywords: Education, Humanism, India, Kural, Paulo Freire, Thiruvalluvar

This article explores the humanism-centered educational and social philosophy expressed by the great Tamil (Indian) literary work, *Thiruvalluvar Kural*, commonly known as the *Thirukkural* or *Kural* for short. Well-known among Tamils, but little-known outside of South Asia, the *Kural* is “the best known and most frequently quoted of Tamil texts” and “has received more [ancient] commentaries (ten) than any other Tamil text” (Blackburn 2000: 455, 452). Offering advice on education, politics, business, and inter-personal relations based on principles such as trust, honesty, and integrity (Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011), the *Kural* is often seen by Tamil speakers as a text “written for practical application for all times and in all places” (Chandramouliswar 1950: 3). As many scholars have documented, the *Kural* has had a long-lasting impact for generations and that influence remains strong today in South India and amongst the Tamil diaspora (Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011: 460).

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As exemplified by the *Kural*, this study illustrates how *humanism* as an educational idea goes back for centuries and has taken different forms in different societies. As Miller (2017: 3) explains, “though it comes in many varieties, humanism(s) promote the value of human life, the possibility for its flourishing, and believes it not robbery that humans might see the world as it is—beyond fabrications—so that we might all work to make it what it could be.” Emphasizing this evolution, I juxtapose the humanist ideas of the *Kural* with a contemporary classic, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a text with unprecedented influence on modern humanist education and critical pedagogy (Glass 2001: 15).¹

This comparative study focuses on overlapping but distinct varieties of educational “humanism,” a concept which refers to a belief system dedicated to maximizing the human potential, dignity, and freedom of all people (e.g. Lamont 1965; Davies 1996; Brockett 1997; Dewey 1997; Kirkeby 2014; Miller 2017). At humanism’s core are five essential components. Firstly, the modern Western idea of humanism is rooted in the “Latin translation, *humanitas*, of the Greek core concept for lifelong learning, *paideia*” (Kirkeby 2014: 422) reflecting a faith that human beings individually and collectively can make progress through learning to achieve their inherent potential and transcend their animalistic nature. Secondly, the humanist ideal maintains that all people are worthy of dignity by right of their species. Hence, they should unite around their common humanity and mutually respect each other instead of falling prey to artificial divisions and conflicts on the bases of tribalism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and so on (Davies 1996: 21–24).

Thirdly, humanism champions the development of a “rational consciousness” (ibid: 60) based on “empirical science and critical reason” (Wolfe 2009: xiv) while opposing blindly following inherited traditions, superstitions, or the dictates of political and religious authorities (Miller 2017). Fourthly, alongside educational training in the physical sciences and the scientific method, humanism calls for the study of languages, literature, history, and classics (i.e. *humanities*) to facilitate developing an ethical consciousness and responsibility to the community so that “men” would “give up their futile, never-finished effort to dominate one another to engage in the cooperative task of dominating nature in the interests of humanity” (Dewey 1997: 283). Lastly, humanism champions individual autonomy and self-development over dependency and conformity (Davies 1996: 16; Kirkeby 2014: 423; Miller 2017: 6). Thus, by granting the human ontological and empirical precedence over the supernatural, the natural, and superstition, humanism’s grand (cl)aim is for prejudice, discrimination, and unscientific ways of living to be deposed in favour of reason, solidarity, and progress.

Thus, at a time when educators around the world are discussing the relevance of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy “to promote a culture of critical thinking amongst students for social transformation and democracy” (Mehta and Pandya 2015: 213), I contend that it is useful to consider not only Freire’s radical humanism emanating from the Western hemisphere but also classical, Eastern, and mainstream humanist ideas as well. As Freire (2000: 95) himself famously acknowledged, “one cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.”

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. It begins by reviewing core elements of the *Kural*’s and Paulo Freire’s visions of education and society followed by a discussion of the relevance of their distinct but overlapping humanist visions. As the study concludes, the

¹ I also draw upon Freire’s (2014) reflections and reliving of that text in his later *Pedagogy of Hope*.

Kural is progressive in its own right, but takes what today might be described as a more mainstream stance in contrast to Freire's radical vision. Nevertheless, both educational philosophies share a common humanist bond representing important breakthroughs within their own given contexts. More specifically, the *Kural* supports a shift in consciousness and social practices away from caste rigidity, superstition, and pre-humanist beliefs while Freire championed transitioning from rigid, top-down and alienating educational delivery models to learning processes and societies that are more democratized, dialogic and egalitarian.

The Kural

The *Thirukkural* (or *Kural*), is a classical text of India written in the Tamil language that has been translated into multiple Western languages including Latin, German, French, Czech, and English (e.g. Sundaram 1990; Diaz 2000; Drew and Lazarus 1999, 2018; Pope et al. 2002, and Rajagopalachari 2005).² Though often overlooked by Western scholars for not being written in Sanskrit (Venkatachalapathy 2005: 542), the *Kural* is laden with political significance, widely influential among modern Tamil speakers, and one finds "educated Tamils often quote verses from *Tirukkural* in response to real-life situations, much as they would quote a proverb" (Cutler 1992: 552). As for its meaning, "Thiru" means "holy or sacred" and "Kural" means "metre" as the text is "a holy work composed in verse" (Than 2011: 113).³ "Composed in the most beautiful poetry" (Subramaniam 1963: 163), the text is comprised of couplets in the form of "*kural-venpa* (or 'short-verse')" totaling 1330 verses spread across 130 chapters of ten couplets each divided into three sections with 380 couplets on *Aram* (Moral Virtue/Dharma), 700 on *Porul* (Meaning/Wealth/Management/ Political Economy), and 250 on *Enbam* (Love/Pleasure/Enjoyment) mirroring "the fourfold Hindu ideas of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*" (Wright 1996: 162) although a possible fourth section on "*moksa* (in Tamil: *vitu*) was left out because, the commentators explain, it cannot be properly discussed in texts" (Blackburn 2000: 453).

Sometimes labeled the "Tamil Veda" due to its "enormous prestige" (Cutler 1992: 550), there is no consensus on who wrote it or when it first appeared though most agree the *Kural* was composed sometime between the second century B.C.E. and eighth century C.E. and nowadays some scholars assert that its author lived around 500 or 600 C.E. (Sundaram 1990: 8). Although some claim the *Kural* was penned by a Jain or Buddhist, popular legend maintains that the author (or as least his mother) was a Paraiyar (an Untouchable) or a member of a low ranking occupational caste (i.e. weaver or drummer).⁴

Of greatest importance, however, is the general perception today that Thiruvalluvar did not originate from a high-caste Brahmin community and instead hailed from a lower caste background. This has strongly influenced the text's reception and its importance in today's struggles among lower and intermediate castes pursuing social justice vis-à-vis Brahmin, Aryan, and North Indian dominance over the putatively indigenous Dravidians of Tamil

² Direct quotes from the *Kural* in this article are cited in the form "v175" referring to *Kural* verse 175 in either the Pope et al. (2002) or Drew and Lazarus (2018) translation or "r15" referring to page 15 in the Rajagopalachari (2005) translation.

³ The *Kural* is regarded as a "sacred book" by the Tamil Vaishnava tradition (Manickam 1999: 7).

⁴ As Sundaram (1990: 8) notes, "whether Valluvar was the poet's name or that of the sub-caste to which he belonged (determined by the occupation or vice versa) is not certain. Valluvan was a name associated with a weaver. It was also the name given to a drummer proclaiming a king's orders on an elephant-back."

speaking South India (e.g. Manickam 1999).⁵ There are two notable implications of this interpretation of the *Kural*'s origins for reforming an otherwise hierarchically organized, unequal, and caste-stratified society. Firstly, the myth of Thiruvalluvar suggests that castebased oppression is counterproductive because its incredibly talented author came from a lower caste background suggesting that perhaps many of society's most talented members are from lower castes and Tamil society will be unable to make best use of their talents if it oppresses them. Secondly, the legend of Thiruvalluvar appears to harken back to a past era prior to caste rigidity featuring a more egalitarian social order when someone from any caste background could flourish suggesting both that a "pure" Tamil society (uncorrupted by external dominators) existed in the past and should be realized again.⁶

Thus, given the importance of reviving Tamil identity and glory within South Asian political struggles for autonomy, equality, and social justice during the British colonial and post-colonial periods, the *Kural* has taken on exceptional importance in resisting Sanskritization and "the northern tradition of Sanskrit and Brahminical learning" in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu with the text's renaissance over the past two centuries coinciding with "a Tamil desire to imagine a past independent of Brahminical control, rituals and texts" (Blackburn 2000: 478). In this sense, the *Kural* plays a powerful role in contemporary Tamil society whereby

Ancient Tamilnadu was seen as an egalitarian society where caste and religion did not exist—and if they did it was due to the beginning of incursions from the north/ Aryans/Sanskrit. Love, valour and munificence were the most valued attributes. This secular vision of ancient Tamil society was counterposed to the unequal society that Tamilnadu became after the advent of Aryans and Brahmins. Caste and religion accompanied them, thus turning Tamil society into an unequal one (Venkatachalapathy 2005: 547).

As Meganathan (2009: 320) points out, the *Kural* is a great symbol of this resistance.

Thiruvalluvar was portrayed as a sage-like person, sporting a beard, sitting in a meditating pose holding a palm leaf and an ancient pen. Today every school-going Tamil child knows the image of Thiruvalluvar and his statues have been erected all over the state. The present DMK government (headed by M. Karunanidhi) declared the birthday of Thiruvalluvar, 15 January...as Tamil New Year's day.

While the precise content of the *Kural* is open to contention because of its poetic style, scholars agree on its relatively secular nature compared to Hindu-influenced classical texts of northern India (e.g. Cutler 1992; Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011). As Subramaniam (1963: 163) notes, "while [the *Kural*] mentions God as the creator, and worship as his due, it is bare of theology and mysticism. Its ethics and definition of virtues are broadly based on Jain *humanism* but not logically related to any particular religious doctrine" (italics added). A classical commentary similarly observes how "Brahmins maintained control over the Vedas," but "no one controls the *Kural*" (Blackburn 2000: 457).⁷ In this respect, the *Kural*

⁵ Tamil politics differs from elsewhere in India as the state of Tamil Nadu in South India has been long governed by regional parties professing a Dravidian ideology that contests domination by Brahmins and North Indians (e.g. Joshi 2012; Joshi and McGrath 2015).

⁶ As Cutler (1992: 555) points out, "*Thirukkural* is said to be free from the caste-ism and sexism that mar Sanskrit *dharmasastra* texts."

⁷ "The text speaks of god in the singular and contains no obvious references to any of the commonly recognized attributes of Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva" (Cutler 1992: 556).

expresses a contrasting vision to the dominant Hindu worldview long present in much of India.

In the *Kural*, the ideal, peaceful life defined by love and virtue in this world is lovingly presented in all details. Above all, the happiness of family life is shown as the highest ideal. This idea stands in opposition to the traditional priestly value system in which penance and meditation serve as the most desirable works (Amaladass 2007: 15).

According to Parimelalakar's influential fourteenth century commentary on the text, virtuous conduct or "upright behavior" (*olukkam*) is more powerful than prosperity and pleasure in the *Kural* (Cutler 1992: 556). The *Kural* also discusses two versions of virtuous conduct—the "the duties of man" as a householder (*illaram*) and the lifestyle of a renouncer (*turavaram*) (ibid: 555) or "ascetic" (Chandramouliswar 1950: 3) though it does not portray the latter as superior to the householder thereby revealing its secular leanings. In other words, "renunciation...was fine, but without householders the ascetics would starve" (Sundaram 1990: 12).

As for ethical prescriptions, Thiruvalluvar opposed the use of harsh words, condemned disrespecting the great, and inveighed against "lust, anger, greed, vanity, haughtiness and overjoy" (Subramaniam 1963: 166). One should abstain from courtesans, liquor, gambling, and meat while consuming food in moderation (Amaladass 2007: 13). Hard work is especially extolled and only wealth earned through virtuous means is seen as valuable: "all wealth that has been obtained with tears (to the victims by unethical practices) will depart with tears (to the business leader); but what has been by fair means, though with loss at first, will afterwards yield fruit" (Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011: 467). Other virtues include transparency, truthfulness, engaging in respectful communication, and harming neither the environment nor human health (ibid: 463) while the highest virtue is love: "love and right conduct give to the householder's life its true character and purposefulness...in love alone is the secret of life" (r3, r10).

A crucial question that naturally arises in response to such prescriptions is "how can a society and its members adopt such behavior?" The *Kural*'s answer points to education and the text offers us a relatively egalitarian vision by seemingly advocating for education to be open to all.⁸ This is inferable from the text's insistence that learning matters more than the class/caste status into which an individual is born: "the unlettered though born in a higher social class are inferior in status to those who though born low have acquired learning" (r79). The *Kural* also conveys that "the best inheritance that a father can provide for his son is an education that will fit him to take an honored place among cultured men" and "a discriminating mind is the greatest of possessions, without it all other possessions will come to nothing" (r6, r81).

Importantly, the *Kural* assigns greater value to education and mental acuity than to money or social status. It tells us to always take advantage of opportunities for further learning and "the purpose of education is to develop the intellect to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong and [be] cautioned by one's own conscience" (Muniapan and Rajantheran

⁸ The *Kural*'s primary discussion on education (chapters 40-43) appears not in its first section on ethics/virtue but its second section on meaning/wealth (chapters 39-108). This sequencing implies that aside from having a responsible king (the topic of chapter 39) education comes first in enabling individuals to obtain meaning and wealth in life.

2011: 464).⁹ This is particularly the case for leaders who must be not only “well versed in books” but also “listen to the counsels of sages” and engage in “deep deliberation” (Chandramouliswar 1950: 5) in order to “possess a real perception of things...and not mere bibliomania” which requires, among other things, the ability to undertake “scientific and exhaustive analysis” (ibid: 8).

The *Kural* assigns *truth* special prominence in education and life: “Of all good things we’ve scanned with studious care, there’s nought that can with truthfulness compare” (v300). This means that “to discern the truth, whatever source it emanates from, is the true quality of wisdom” (Amaladass 2007: 13). Education also serves a dual purpose (both ethically and economically) in the *Kural* whereby “the national prosperity of a progressive state is reflected by its prosperous people industrious in character, abundance of wealth earned through proper means and moral elevation of its citizens” (Chandramouliswar 1950: 9). Continuous learning and moral education are therefore vital as is upright behavior. As the *Kural* asks us, “What is the advantage of extensive and accurate knowledge if a man through covetousness acts senselessly towards all?” (v175; see also Mani et al. 2003: 400).

The Humanist Vision of the Kural

Having reviewed basic tenets of the *Kural*’s philosophy I will now explain how it endorses both a *humane* society and one in line with *humanism*’s core elements of progress, unity, science, and the individual.¹⁰ Firstly, the *Kural* champions progress in terms of humans transcending an animalistic way of thinking/behaving while referring to God as an abstract concept without any particular religious meaning or affiliation much like the deism held by many Western humanists (Sundaram 1990: 11; Manickam 1999: 10).

Secondly, the *Kural* shares the elitism often found among mainstream Western humanists who distinguish civilization from the uncivilized (Davies 1996). As the *Kural* emphasizes,

The learned are said to have real eyes, but the unlearned have (merely) two sores in their face (v393).

The unlearned also are very excellent men, if they know how to keep silence before the learned (v403).

The unlearned are like worthless barren land; all that can be said of them is, that they exist (v406).

This contrast between the learned and those deficient in learning speaks to a basic tension within Western humanism between generosity and supporting the community on the one hand and erudition on the other (Kirkeby 2014: 422). As Miller (2017: 7) notes, the Latin “*humanitas* connotes a philanthropic stance of goodwill towards others” whereas the Greek “notion of *paideia*...notes the significance of erudition, a special kind of knowledge only possible for those educated and trained in the liberal arts.” As the above passages illustrate,

⁹ For instance, the *Kural* notes how one’s ethical behavior and learning can be significantly enriched or tainted by those around one since “a man assimilates the character of his associates” (Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011: 466).

¹⁰ John Dewey (1997: 288) distinguishes the *humane* from *humanism* noting how “‘humanism’ means at bottom being imbued with an intelligent sense of human interests” and the activity should “enlarge the imaginative vision of life” by engaging in “study so pursued that it increases concern for the values of life, any study producing greater sensitiveness to social well-being and greater ability to promote that well-being is humane study.”

the *Kural* leans more towards *paideia* than *humanitas* by looking down upon those who are unlearned.

Thirdly, as with mainstream Western humanists, when it comes to discerning truth the *Kural* champions scientific inquiry over religious dogma. Not only did the *Kural* emphasize the importance of *listening* to obtain knowledge instead of assuming that one already has the answers (v411–v414), it also challenged social conventions and the religious establishment.¹¹ In this respect, the *Kural*'s criticism of caste rigidity and hierarchy is highly progressive as reflected in its insistence that “the unlearned, though born in a high caste, are not equal in dignity to the learned, though they may have been born in a low caste” (v409). As Sundaram (1990: 12) explains, according to *Thiruvalluvar* there were “indeed two classes of men, the noble and the base. But birth, he felt, had nothing to do with either. The noble, he said, would help others even with his bones. Whereas the base, ruled only by fear and greed, are completely worthless and in a crisis will only sell themselves.”¹²

The *Kural*'s emphatic insistence upon learning, empiricism, and critical thinking not only challenged non-meritocratic social hierarchies but also anticipated modern scientific reasoning. Closely reminiscent of mainstream Western humanism, the *Kural* also expresses faith in progress and every man's individual self-development. As the *Kural* expresses it: Let a man learn thoroughly whatever he may learn, and let his conduct be worthy of his learning (v391).

How is it that anyone can remain without learning, even to his death, when (to the learned man) every country is as his own, and every town as his own (v397). To discern the hidden truth in everything, by whomsoever spoken, is wisdom (v423).

Thus, overall the *Kural* clearly resonates with the optimism of mainstream Western humanism in the “human capacity to advance, rely upon and utilize science and therefore human progress to mitigate the dangers of human incapacity and ethical unaccountability” (Miller 2017: 18).

Comparing the *Kural* to Paulo Freire's Radical Humanism

Having elucidated key aspects of the *Kural*'s humanism, I now place that text into dialogue with the radical humanist vision expressed by Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Born into the largely impoverished state of Pernambuco in Northeastern Brazil, Freire dedicated his career to promoting adult literacy and critical consciousness. Identifying with “a Third World Left that sought independence” (Kirkendall 2010: 9) from both US and Soviet spheres of influence, Freire advocated a dialogical and problemposing model of education that became influential in many colonies and former colonies of the Global South among educators and activists struggling against imperialism, racism, authoritarianism, economic inequality, and poverty.

As with many of the intellectuals at the time, Freire was influenced by Marxist political economy and believed in the necessity of class struggle but he rejected the elitist and

¹¹ Due to the *Kural*'s anti-Brahmin and anti-ascetic stance, some commentators have associated the text with Jainism or Buddhism because of its challenge to Hindu religious orthodoxy.

¹² Sundaram (1990: 13) describes how “According to Valluvar, to prefer personal loyalty to knowledge and diligence was to court disaster... Valluvar's insistence on commonsense and moderation is a constant refrain in the book. His appeal was always to do or think what was patently beneficial. Why, he wondered, did men stop acquiring knowledge when they knew that learning opened all doors?”

Leninist vanguardism of orthodox Marxists. Rather, as a Christian socialist, Freire staunchly supported genuinely democratic and open approaches to organizing education, politics, and society. Aiming critically to change students' consciousness, Freire's approach was based on forming "cultural circles, in which members of a community joined together to discuss common interests and concerns and to work together" (Kirkendall 2010: 20). Using the popular language that peasants and laborers themselves used in everyday life, literacy programs inspired by Freire's approach often focused on issues related to citizenship like voting, engaging in collective action, and supporting unions or other forms of mass organization (ibid: 32). Later marketed as "learning to read and write in forty hours of class time," (ibid: 28) "the Freire method" of adult literacy training was "relatively inexpensive" and attracted much attention (ibid: 41).

Although his efforts to expand literacy were rather successful, a 1964 coup d'état turned Brazil into a military dictatorship and Freire was imprisoned for his involvement with the previous regime.¹³ To avoid further imprisonment, Freire took refuge in Chile where he spent four and a half years working under the Christian Democratic government of President Eduardo Frei on behalf of his Agrarian Reform Corporation (CORA) and later for international organizations to educate peasants.¹⁴ While in exile in Chile, "the Catholic humanism of the Christian Democratic administration provided a congenial environment for Freire" (ibid: 65) and it was during this time that he wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a book that would be translated into many languages. As Macedo (2000: 12) notes, students in Central America, South America, Tanzania, Chile, Guinea-Bissau and other nations struggling to overthrow totalitarianism and oppression, passionately embraced Freire and his proposals for liberation. It is no wonder that his success in teaching Brazilian peasants how to read landed him in prison and led to a subsequent long and painful exile. Oppressed people all over the world identified with Paulo Freire's denunciation of the oppressive conditions that were choking millions of poor people, including a large number of middle-class families that had bitterly begun to experience the humanity of hunger in a politically very rich and fertile country.

Following the book's publication and a brief stint in 1969 at Harvard's Center for Studies in Education and Development, Freire decided to forgo the academic life relocating with his family to Switzerland where he spent over a decade working as a special education advisor for the ecumenical World Council of Churches. This brought him on travels to many parts of the world giving him the opportunity to further promote his educational views.¹⁵

As Kirkendall (2010: 22–26) has pointed out, it is important to recognize that Freire's work during the 1960s and 1970s was part of the process of post-Second World War decolonization that was occurring in Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the 1950s-1980s. This was also a time when the United Nations, Third World independence movements, and the two contending superpowers of the Cold War perceived themselves as

¹³ As Kirkendall (2010: 28) notes, Freire's associates spoke in favor of "revolution," but "references to revolution obscured disagreements over what the term meant, whether it was the rapid economic and social changes that were taking place, the impact of an ever expanding electorate, or a deliberate attempt by political forces to transform the political system, whether through peaceful or violent means. It also was a revolution, many insisted, that might come about through the dramatic expansion of educational opportunities for adult illiterates."

¹⁴ Frei's Christian Democratic ideology "rejected Marxism and liberalism, both of which he saw as being based on materialist conceptions of humanity" (Kirkendall 2010: 65).

¹⁵ Freire finally returned with his family to live in Brazil in 1980. He then joined forces with the Brazilian Worker's Party eventually becoming Secretary of Education for São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, in 1988.

having a stake in overcoming dramatically high illiteracy rates in many former colonies. More specifically, it was against the backdrop of influential international breakthroughs including Cuba's 1961 literacy campaign, China's Cultural Revolution which began in 1966, and worldwide student movements that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was completed in the late 1960s and widely disseminated shortly thereafter.¹⁶

What Freire (2000: 35) made clear in his writings was the necessity of spreading a "critical consciousness" to those around us so that all can learn "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." To achieve this he called for taking a radical approach because "the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it" (ibid: 39).¹⁷ As a result, Freire championed education, reflection, and action as means to eliminate "dehumanization," for which he believed "the solution is not to 'integrate' [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (ibid: 74). Freire perceived this transformation as requiring a humanist orientation to the world as undergirded by the concepts of: (a) humanization, (b) consciousness, (c) dialogue, (d) praxis, and (e) character. As I will now discuss, these key concepts also play a role in the *Kural*'s more mainstream humanist vision.

A. *Humanization*: In Freire's view, the purpose of life or, as he frames it, each "individual's ontological and historical vocation" is "to be more fully human" (ibid: 55). A crucial distinction he makes is that "only human beings *are* praxis—the praxis which, as the reflection and action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation. Animal activity, which occurs without praxis, is not creative; people's transforming activity is" (ibid: 100). From this perspective, the quest to become fully human is not just an individual pursuit. People must collectively "struggle for a fuller humanity" (ibid: 47) to eliminate "dehumanization," a condition whereby humans are alienated "from their own decision-making" and changed "into objects" to serve others (ibid: 85).

In the same way that Freire treats humans as innately deserving a meaningful life, the *Kural* envisions education as a means to separate people from being mere animals. As the *Kural* poignantly states, "only the literate can be said to have eyes. The unlettered have but two openings in the face, not eyes" (r77). Moreover, the *Kural* argues that the oppressed who work hard for a living so that others can pursue spiritual pursuits should be respected (Rajagopalachari 2005: 3). This is especially the case for those working in agriculture as all humans depend on their produce: "They only live by right that till the soil and raise their food. The rest are parasites" (r109). Thus, while not mentioning "oppressors" as Freire does, the *Kural* does denounce "parasites" for taking too much away from hard-working agricultural laborers (who closely resemble Freire's depiction of "the oppressed"). The *Kural* also states: "wealth in the hands of the ignorant is a danger to the world" (r79) and "far more excellent is the extreme poverty of the wise than wealth obtained by heaping up of sinful deeds" (Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011: 466). Advocating for householders to be generous and to have an "open house" (r10) to relieve the hunger of the poor, the *Kural* also

¹⁶ Freire saw the text as largely oriented to aid oppressed students and help them in their struggles but also later demonstrated considerable humility claiming "not to consider his previous experiences to have any 'universal validity'" (Kirkendall 2010: 107).

¹⁷ While some see Freire as offering a more "apolitical and open" approach (e.g. Neumann 2016), his work is typically seen as expressing strong commitments against (and in favor of transforming) those established structures of society which engender oppression (e.g. Roberts 2016).

condemned grand displays of supposed holiness expressed through extreme acts of self-harm and self-deprivation.

B. Consciousness: Consciousness is a central element in Freire's humanist vision which "makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed" (Freire 2000: 48). Freire believed people must "overcome their false perception of reality" (ibid: 86) and "perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (ibid 49). Therefore, Freire advocated having "a total vision of the context in order subsequently to separate and isolate its constituent elements and by means of this analysis achieve a clearer perception of the whole" (ibid: 104). The educational process should help one to shed perceptions of one's "intrinsic inferiority" (ibid: 153) and abandon "the oppressor consciousness [which] tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination" (ibid: 58).

The *Kural* similarly advocates "a consciousness and a spirit-centered approach...based on eternal values and moral principles" (Muniapan and Rajantheran 2011: 467). In the *Kural*, consciousness comes first and "the movements of a man who has not a sensitive conscience are like the simulation of life by marionettes moved by strings" (r106). The *Kural* opposes being envious and greedy (like the oppressor's consciousness in Freire's view) stating "there is no greater wealth than the possession of a mind that is free from envy" (r25). "If man can learn to envy none on earth, 'tis richest gift, - beyond compare its worth" (v162). The *Kural* also implores us to let go of attachments; "as one by one you detach yourself from the things of the world you are saved from the pain in respect of it... possession tends to hold the mind in delusion and therefore is a hindrance to true knowledge... There is no possession so great as non-desire either in this world or in the worlds beyond" (r57, r61). Such passages suggest that both Freire and the *Kural* favor renouncing the pursuit of worldly excess and the desire to accumulate as many possessions as possible though Freire especially seeks for oppressors to renounce their greed so that the oppressed can meet their legitimate needs whereas the *Kural* more explicitly invites all to be less materialistic.

Another overlapping consensus among these humanists extends to compassion and forgiveness. The *Kural* tells us that "the highest and most precious of all arts consists in not returning evil for evil" (r32). This resonates with Freire's prescription for the oppressed neither to become vengeful against their oppressors nor to become "sub-oppressors" (2000: 45). Similarly, the *Kural* is optimistic that a vicious cycle of evil can be transformed into a virtuous cycle: "the best punishment for those who do evil to you is to shame them by returning good for evil" (r54). However, the *Kural* departs from Freire by conceptualizing "wisdom" as not only discerning "the truth," expressing thoughts "in simple terms," and loving the world, but also to "know and be prepared for what is coming," and to "read the signs and foresee developments" (Amaladass 2007: 14; see also Pope et al. 2002: chapter 43). As the *Kural* expresses it, "the wise are those who know beforehand what will happen; those who do not know this are the unwise" (v427).

C. Praxis: To be fully human, Freire extolled regularly engaging in *praxis* which refers to reflecting upon one's actions and acting upon one's reflections in an iterative manner (2000: 53, 66). He endorsed this method because abstract ideas to which one is merely exposed are less likely to transform one's behavior and consciousness. Given that "a person learns to swim in the water, not in a library" (ibid: 137), in helping to spread literacy to adults Freire correspondingly advocated engaging in "educational projects" outside of

formal schooling that are carried out “with [not for] the oppressed in the process of organizing them” (ibid: 54).¹⁸

While the *Kural* does not discuss the concept of *praxis*, as in Freire’s thinking there is emphasis on taking proper action as informed by one’s learning: “what is the advantage of great and exact knowledge...if a man behaves meaninglessly with his neighbors through greed” (Amaladass 2007: 15). In learning, the *Kural* emphasizes “the duty of relating one’s conduct to one’s knowledge” (r76) which suggests applying knowledge directly to one’s actions. Moreover, “one should consult those who have actually gone through such operations themselves and who therefore possess intimate knowledge of them” (r158). In step with Freire’s humanist vision, the *Kural* implores us to take the first step in changing the world: “the good deed that is done not in return, but in the first instance, is more precious than anything in this world or beyond” (v14). Lastly, regarding action, the *Kural* and Freire both oppose wasting *time*—a precious resource to be harnessed for either virtuous conduct (for the former) or following man’s ontological vocation (for the latter).

D. *Dialogue*: In line with favoring *praxis*, Freire rejects the “banking model of education” whereby educational administrators and teachers control the curriculum and deposit pieces of knowledge into passive students with the aim of maintaining the status quo (2000: 71). Instead, he endorsed a problem-posing and co-intentional educational model whereby teachers and students “are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (ibid: 69). Freire encouraged dialogue in his pedagogy arguing that “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*” takes place “only in communication” (ibid: 77).¹⁹ Moreover, in dialogical education, he believed “the object of the investigation is not persons (as if they were anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found” (ibid: 97).²⁰

Thus, at first glance, the *Kural* seems to assume a more top-down/hierarchical approach than Freire’s emphasis on bottom-up/egalitarian educational methods. For instance, the *Kural* implores us to be thoroughly supplicant to knowledgeable people in order to learn from them. This differs from Freire’s more egalitarian notion of a “teacher-student” and “students-teachers” who learn from each other (2000: 80). Yet, *Kural* also emphasizes how we can and should learn from others (not just formal teachers). For instance, friendship entails not only “mutual admiration, but also readiness for harsh and ethical advice when needed” (Amaladass 2007: 13). Moreover, “true Knowledge enables one to understand the true import of things from whomsoever one learns them and not to be misled by the circumstances in which they appear” (r80). Community service is also championed by the *Kural*: “there is no pleasure in the world equal to the joy of being helpful to those around you... There is nothing that so dignifies the individual as being ever ready to render service to the community” (r34, r169). Such emphasis on community service parallels Freire’s

¹⁸ In Brazil and Chile where Freire worked, literacy held major political significance as illiterates at that time were barred from voting.

¹⁹ Freire (2014: 216) opposed school systems which inculcate “obedience, subservience, submission, hierarchy, imitation.”

²⁰ While championing dialogue, Freire (2014: 34) also maintained that “verbal restraint is an indispensable virtue for those who devote themselves to the dream of a better world—a world in which women and men meet in a process of ongoing liberation.”

struggle to liberate the oppressed although the *Kural*'s suggestion of having an "open house" towards the poor might be interpreted as more humanitarian than radically humanist.

The *Kural* also champions self-respect, hard work, independence and truth. Regarding the latter, "of all things confirmed in our experience, the rule of truthfulness stands out most firmly established. There is nothing more precious than truth" (r51) and "true understanding is that which uncovers and shows the reality behind the apparent and diverse exteriors of all things" (r60). Thus, as with Freire, the *Kural*'s educational aim was to achieve true knowledge and understanding—to step behind the world of *schein* (appearance) to see its underlying character, the real *sein* (existence) in order to grasp the true essence of reality. As a *Kural* interpreter states, "the enlightened man perceives the reality behind the diverse phenomenal appearances covering it" (Rajagopalachari 2005: 60).²¹

Resonating with Freire's emphasis on dialogue, the *Kural* calls for adjusting how and what one speaks according to the situation and one's specific interlocutors: "good and successful speech requires a careful understanding of the disposition and receptivity of the audience and a clear understanding of the subjects talked about...If the audience is composed of simple folk, hold back your learning and be a simple and unlearned man" (r145). Thus, like Freire, the *Kural* highlights the need to know about the people with whom one is communicating and recognizing that relationships based on trust are ideal. As the *Kural* states, we should "entrust work to men, only after testing them" (r125), but after testing we must trust because "we cannot get the full value of a man if we do not trust him fully" (r126). This resembles Freire's claim that "trust is contingent on the evidence which one party provides the others of his true, concrete intentions; it cannot exist if that party's words do not coincide with their actions" (2000: 91). Thus, Freire's dialogical pedagogy partially overlaps with the *Kural* though the latter places greater emphasis on individuals investing hard work and effort into acquiring knowledge in the education process since "study brings knowledge in proportion to the industry bestowed" (r77).

E. Character: A fifth core element in Freire's pedagogy which also resonates with the *Kural* is the importance of character. According to the former, the oppressed are fatalistic, fooled, divided, self-deprecating, distrusting of themselves, and convinced of their own unfitness. These traits stem from divide and conquer strategies employed by the oppressors to prevent unity among the oppressed (Freire 2000: 146, 172). By contrast, the values Freire believes are needed to overcome oppression are "a profound love for the world and for people" (ibid: 89), humility, faith in humankind, "trust in people and their creative power" (ibid: 75), "fellowship and solidarity" (ibid: 85), "consistency between words and actions" (ibid: 176), willingness to take risks, and critical thinking. Freire (2014: 3) subsequently stressed the importance of "hope" stating "one of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be." Moreover, in Freire's view, one's work (i.e. employment) should be meaningful and secure.²²

Similarly, the *Kural* emphasizes the importance of cultivating the right character traits while implying these should be inculcated in students via moral education. Persistence is one of the most heavily emphasized of these traits: "there is nothing that is impossible if one

²¹ The *Kural*'s emphasis on telling and discovering the truth and not misleading (or being misled) arguably foreshadows a principle embraced in modern Tamil culture of "demanding from speech a truthful consistency with the inner disposition of the heart" (Pandian 2008: 472).

²² As Freire (2000: 145) explains, "If for a person to be in the world of work is to be totally dependent, insecure, and permanently threatened-if their work does not belong to them-the person cannot be fulfilled. Work that is not free ceases to be a fulfilling pursuit and becomes an effective means of dehumanization."

brings to bear on one's work the instrument of a vigilant and resourceful mind" (r70). Other valued characteristics include compassion, sensitiveness to shameful conduct, social cooperation extended to family and neighbors, grace towards other people and their faults, and constantly upholding the truth (Amaladass 2007: 14). One should avoid all four factors that instigate evil acts (*agati*): partiality (*chanda*), anger (*dosa*); ignorance (*moha*) and fear (*bhaya*) (Than 2011: 117).²³ The *Kural* also tells us to forgive and forget when someone has wronged us: "Even as happiness in this world depends on material possessions, compassion is that on which your happiness in the world beyond wholly depends... Those who have lost their possessions may flourish once again but there is no hope for those who have failed in the duty of compassion" (r41). Lastly, the *Kural* views positive character traits as obtainable through effort as opposed to something intrinsic to specific individuals. Many of these traits boil down to self-control, a habit one must acquire:

Guard thou as wealth the power of self-control; than this no greater gain to living soul!
(v122)

There is no bigger fool than the man who has acquired much learning and preaches the same to others, but who does not control himself (r72).

Discussion

While it might be easier to identify differences between the *Kural* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* given the temporal and cultural contexts from which they originated, there is great value in recognizing their similarities since the quest to articulate a viable humanism might wisely draw from these divergent sources. As Wilber (2001: 112) reminds us, "if we remain merely at the stage of celebrating diversity, we ultimately are promoting fragmentation, alienation, separation and despair... It is not enough to recognize the many ways in which we are all different; we need to go further and start recognizing the many ways that we are also similar." As Freire (1993: xi) himself insisted, "Narratives of liberation must not ignore the cultural particularism of their roots, yet at the same time they must not abandon the opportunity to co-ordinate themselves on a global basis."²⁴ Thus, I believe it is worthwhile to identify where there is an overlapping consensus among these two great educational humanists and to highlight the common humanist bond shared by the educational philosophies of the *Kural* and Freire.

Among their important commonalities, both authors were clearly masters of words hailing from humanities backgrounds - Freire as a grammarian/literacy teacher and Thiruvalluvar as a poet. Their educational philosophies strongly converge in advocating teachers' respect for students, students' respect for teachers, teachers not manipulating their students, the importance of students being disciplined, and the rejection of fatalism.²⁵ Moreover, both stress that education should teach students to be more critical and to think

²³ In this respect, the *Kural* resembles Buddhist precepts embedded in texts like the *Lankavatara Sutra* which stress "three attachments that are especially deep-seated in the minds of all: greed, anger and infatuation, which are based on lust, fear and pride" (Goddard 1983/1932: 102).

²⁴ Calls for deeper contextualization of particularities in comparative analyses are often intended to enrich dialogue but at times may inadvertently inhibit dialogue by establishing unrealistic or insurmountable criteria and thus reinforcing exclusion of certain voices and perspectives from consideration.

²⁵ Freire (2014: 73) frequently emphasized how "discipline must be *built* and *adopted* by the students."

more broadly as opposed to just learning narrow skill sets.²⁶ Thus, while on the surface it might seem that the thoughts of Freire and Thiruvalluvar were incommensurately different, such an inference would miss the more important commonality that both were addressing societies facing massive educational deficits and human suffering and they were trying to find interventions that would relieve these problems. They also shared a strong awareness of and aversion to imperialism and “cultural invasion” (e.g. Freire 2014: 35)—not only by the sword but also by the word.

Probably the most relevant divergence among these thinkers is that Freire explicitly advocated a shift to a radically more egalitarian model of society both politically and economically. Freire also saw the route to this revolutionary transformation taking place through solidarity and collective action as opposed to sectarianism, intolerance, and disunity.²⁷ As an educator highly influenced by Catholic humanists, Freire (2014: 147, 141) consistently espoused “unity in diversity” and “oneness in difference” over “the ancient rule of the mighty: divide and conquer.” In Freire’s view, capitalist, feudalist, and imperialist social structures ought to be superseded by a democratic socialism that is free of racism, sexism, and class-based discrimination.²⁸ Thus, whereas the *Kural* finds immorality, ignorance, and political incompetence at the core of human suffering, Freire believes that not only political but also economic structures must be radically transformed to eliminate oppression.²⁹

As a radical democrat, Freire (2014: 168) staunchly opposed “vanguardism” and rejected the view that dogmatic Marxists on the left or neoliberal capitalists on the right are privy to the complete truth. Denouncing such elitism he believed educators need to understand the world of the people they are teaching and that educators and students both have ideological blind spots that can only be revealed and overcome through a process of open-minded dialogue seeking to uncover the integrated, oppressive, and changeable reality behind what we often take for granted or treat as immutable (ibid: 19, 74–75).

As for how to further promote a more enriched dialogue between the educational ideas of the *Kural* and Freire, I would propose that Wilber’s (2001) integral approach offers a promising model. Viewing human development as unfolding in stages, Wilber argued that societies and individuals evolve in their ontological and normative beliefs about how the world works from pre-conventional levels (e.g. magical and mythical) to conventional levels (e.g. order-based to scientific to pluralistic) up to more advanced post-conventional levels (e.g. integrally holistic). From this perspective, educators and societies would have to pass first through a lower order pre-humanist ethnocentric consciousness before reaching a science-embracing world-centric humanist level (as advocated by the *Kural*). Then, only after reaching that mainstream humanist level might they be able to further advance to a more post-conventional radical humanist consciousness (as advocated by Freire). From this

²⁶ According to Freire (2014: 123), education should enrich “an understanding of our own selves as historical, political, social, and cultural beings” giving us “a comprehension of how society works. And this will never be imparted by a supposedly purely technological training.”

²⁷ Freire’s “reliving” of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in his later *Pedagogy of Hope* helps to clarify this position.

²⁸ Freire (2014: 86) maintained that the failure of the Soviet model of real-world socialism “was not its socialist dream, but its authoritarian mold...just as what is positive in the capitalist experience has never been the capitalist system, but its democratic mold.”

²⁹ Eclectically influenced by the political economy ideas of Karl Marx, radical psychology of Erich Fromm, and Catholic humanist thinkers, Freire’s “secular theory of liberation” emphasizes collective selftransformation and shifting power from the oppressors to the oppressed (Aronowitz 1993: 14; see also Aronowitz 1998).

perspective, the *Kural* emerges as an early building block in the direction of humanist progress as it addresses a mythically oriented caste-stratified society by championing “rational and scientific inquiry” and “the autonomous ego” over “myth” and “the herd mentality” (ibid: 86). This would put the *Kural* as a precursor and anticipator of Freire who would emerge as a later development (and arguably more advanced stage) in the global humanist tradition. For example, Freire and his supporters were “interested in seeing students replace their ‘magical consciousness,’ in which they attributed supernatural causes to things that happen in their daily life, with critical consciousness” (Kirkendall 2010: 71). In this respect, Freire appears to have also been ahead of his time with much of the world not yet ready to embrace such radical egalitarianism.

Conclusion

This study has found the *Thiruvalluvar Kural* and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to both offer solidly humanistic visions for education and society. Even though one is a pre-modern text from South Asia while the other represents the work of a “Third World” activist from South America,³⁰ both treatises are optimistic about man’s capacity to transform himself and improve the lives of all humans. As related above, the *Kural*’s educational philosophy bears an uncanny resemblance to mainstream Western humanism over the past few centuries despite the pre-modern and non-Western context in which that text was authored. Additionally, both texts have inspired a large number of educational and social reformers to take action on behalf of progressive causes. While Freire’s political economy commitments make his work considerably more radical, both authors champion an emancipatory humanism to transcend and replace anti-humanist practices and beliefs prevalent in their respective societies.

As discussed above, the *Kural*’s humanist approach is moderate in orientation compared to Freire’s radicalism. For instance, the *Kural* is somewhat more paternalistic in calling for philanthropy and charity as opposed to revolution and the restructuring of property ownership to release individuals from their suffering. The *Kural* also accepts the presence of hierarchy among humans and views humans as having an inferior position vis-à-vis God within a cosmic hierarchy. At the same time, the *Kural* does call for differential status among people in society to be earned on the basis of merit (e.g. learning, hard work, and integrity) only rather than through inheritance. It also encourages people to lead highly ethical lives and it condemns oppression against fellow humans or animals. The *Kural* also serves a progressive function for Tamil and Indian society today precisely because it promotes a shift from pre-literate, pre-scientific and pre-humanist ways of thinking to a consciousness that is literate, scientific, and humanist thereby departing radically from the agrarian feudalist and imperialist structures of South Asia’s pre-colonial and colonial past.

In these respects, the *Kural*’s moderate version of humanism differs from Freire, but precisely because it is less radical it may have resonance and appeal with many educators in the Global South for not seeming quite so foreign or alien to existing practices. It may also have the advantage in non-Western contexts of not appearing so “inapplicable” or “Western” as has often been the case in attempts at international educational transplanting (Aurén and Joshi 2016). As Milligan et al. (2011: 58) have noted, “Many in the Muslim world have rejected the colonial and neo-colonial imposition of Western models of education in favor

³⁰ Kirkendall (2010: 108) notes how “Freire saw himself as ‘a man from the Third World.’”

of a movement to Islamize knowledge and thus Islamize education.” Similar forms of backlash might likewise occur in other parts of the world in response to educational initiatives that may appear too out of touch with local conditions and sentiments. For example, Paulo Freire’s literacy programs in multi-lingual Guinea-Bissau likely failed because of the “decision to use the colonial language as the means of instruction” (Kirkendall 2010: 112).³¹

Sharing a deep concern over the need to overcome ethnocentric, patriarchal, and classbased biases, Freire (1993: xii) has since urged progressive educators to “avoid both the totalizing Eurocentric and androcentric logic” and to participate in dialogues in which no one has the upper hand. Hence, redesigning the curriculum in line with Freire’s insistence against cultural invasion invites us to include classics from different cultures like the *Kural* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to enter into a dialogue not only with each other (as done here) but also with ourselves and our own pre-conceptions of education and self-transformation. Through such *praxis* we may in turn begin to realize the value that thinkers like *Thiruvalluvar* can add to Western curricula just as much as Freire can contribute to nonWestern curricula.³²

To conclude, as with Paulo Freire’s inferences based on his experiences working in Brazil and Chile, the deep thoughts of the *Kural* emanating from South India may likewise have great relevance to the rest of the world. While the *Kural* may not hold the same degree of radical idealism or collective action orientation of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, both schools of thought squarely fall within the tradition of educational humanism. Both see humans as capable of changing themselves and their surroundings and that education facilitates this transformation. Both thinkers were also clearly “committed to the value of truth and the promise of humanity” thereby rendering them not just ordinary humanists but rather “profound humanists” (Peters 2016: 1133). Lastly, while there are many ways to interpret a text as rich as the *Thiruvalluvar Kural* (or the writings of Paulo Freire), what has hopefully been demonstrated here is that the *Kural*’s humanist vision is simultaneously admirable, insightful, demanding, and deserving of greater attention from educators and scholars worldwide.

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³¹ Even Brazil, which is primarily monolingual, experienced backlash against Freire’s consciousness raising activities for over a decade starting in 1964 when the military junta employed extensive repression “making plain the dangers of a heightened consciousness” (Kirkendall 2010: 59).

³² While especially pertinent for course syllabi related to educational philosophy, the *Kural*’s thoughts are also relevant for educational planning at global, national, regional, and school levels.

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