

## LEGON AT 60: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE HUMANITIES

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The Current curriculum of the University of Ghana, Legon for the Humanities may be accessed online. Whatever the organizational components of the humanities, one thing is clear: we are being called upon to re-think what is human if we are to offer new directions for his aspect of the university's *raison d'être*. This keynote is a personal statement. I plan to speak as I would do at a family meeting on the key words, Community and Imagination. Seeking new directions for the Humanities demands no less an effort than that of re-imagining the role of the Humanities in our national life.

### Continuing Interest in Human Identity

In the 1970's the WCC launched a study on this issue, simply naming it the "Humanum Studies". It was directed by David Jenkins. This was a period of intensive studies related to Human Rights. The Programme to Combat Racism and the studies surveying the "Community of Women and Men in Church and Society" are but two of them. Reflective Christians were asking again and again, "what is Man?" For my part, I could not associate with any deliberations on "Man" that did not openly include woman. What I was struggling with was a restatement of a Christian anthropology.<sup>2</sup>

A rule of thumb description of the humanities goes like this: "Whatever is not in the sciences belongs to the humanities." Like all other generalizations, it is debatable, and we in the humanities are adept at debating every concept. The humanities, one could argue, are for plumbing the depth of our humanity in order to contribute to generating visions of how human life is to be lived. There are many views on what it means to be human. We are in the process of becoming human and we ourselves are responsible for the end product, if one can posit such an idea. Atheistic humanists operate in this light. Others have a human centred humanism that at the same time has room for extra-human influence. Its stance is that in the

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final analysis human worth, “human agency and human responsibility” for the sake of dignity and justice depend on human will and choices.

For the academic year 2007-08 the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School is offering a lecture series on the theme, “Rethinking the Human.” The series features the following:

- Who is the human in “Human Rights?”
- Or what’s a Heaven for Bioscience and the Alteration of Human limits?
- Humanity, Ethics, and Our Animal Nature
- Is there an innate sense of morality?
- The Resurgence of Imagination.

The culminating conference is simply titled, “Rethinking the Human”. This series focuses particularly on “religious, ethical and cultural perspectives within diverse historical contemporary settings”.

Significantly, we have found it necessary at this time that the university turns 60 to re-imagine what we can proffer in this challenge of rethinking our offerings in relation to studies in the humanities. Human beings are part of the animal world. We believe, however, that we are distinct, and the sense of “the other”, of a world beyond the physical, is a key marker separating us from the rest of the animal world. In the Judeo-Christian religion there is a claim that human beings are only a little below the divine ones ( Psalm 8: 5). In fact, the Hebrew says we are “ a little less than God”. The Akan describe our make up as Body—*nipadua*, Soul—*okra*, which links us up with God, and spirit—*sunsum*, that which constitutes our individual presence. We human beings think so highly of ourselves that, often being so full of ourselves, we exploit the rest of creation with impunity. In the Abrahamic religions we pride ourselves on having been given the stewardship of the rest of creation. If in a university we want to call attention to the role of human beings in the universe, what are some of the parameters to be explored?

### **Dictionary Descriptions of the Humanities**

In the older universities, the humanities comprise Philosophy, History, Law, Politics, Political Science, Literature, Linguistics, etc. Sometimes this discipline carries the name humanics and is described as “the branch of knowledge that deals with human affairs”. But wait: what do we have to study that is outside the humanities? The Cambridge International dictionary says the humanities labels “the study of subjects like literature, language, history, philosophy”, changing the list and the order only slightly from its more comprehensive sibling. Webster’s Concise Dictionary says the humanities consist of “those subjects as philosophy, literature and fine arts that are concerned with human beings and their culture, as distinguished from the sciences”. So, do the natural sciences and social sciences not concern themselves “with human beings and their culture”? But what includes all often ends up being nothing and I think that is the plight of the humanities. As we look at New Directions the issue of our identity and uniqueness will continue to haunt us.

Part of history opts out of the humanities; in some places when law quits it is forced to acknowledge its roots by giving at least a term to the Greek and Roman Classics, an aspect of the humanities that has stayed longest in the British universities. In this university it is even not very clear to me who belongs to the humanities and why. Law, philosophy, classics, language, linguistics, cultural studies, history, psychology, parts of social sciences and parts of African Studies. Do we offer fine arts? As you can see, I am coming from the fringes of academia. You know who you are. My task is to stimulate you to envision what you may become.

It seems to me that the real challenge we face is one of positioning ourselves in such a way as to be relevant to the task of human development in this country, Africa and the world. The human mind is endowed with the capacity to transform creation, and to tap all its energies and potential, we can split the atom, go to space and engineer not only non-living things but living ones too. We can clone and we have the potential to create life. Our exploits have reached a point that has pushed the current Pope to redefine the seven deadly sins, naming them tendencies and delineating what they

urge us to do as the real sins. The tendency to be greedy, for example, is leading us to the sin of environmental degradation.

To be human is to have the ability to create and to transform, and the will and discretion to utilize this ability. The ability to make choices is one that marks us off from the rest of creation. The issue is, on what bases do we make our choices? We in the humanities can position ourselves as humanists, concerned with and interested in human affairs. We can dispense with divine or supernatural matters. We can take a stance or “outlook emphasizing common human needs and seeking solely rational ways of solving human problems”. We can focus our study as an area “concerned with humankind as responsible and progressive intellectual beings”.<sup>3</sup> Our humanistic offerings will not have to struggle with divine or spiritual things. We can do all right without religion, but whose Ghana will we be serving?

A long time ago Prof. Geoffrey Wainright of Duke University, Durham, USA, requested a paper from me in connection with the Humanum Studies mentioned above. My offering was titled, “On Being Human: A Theological Anthropology”. I could not do otherwise; I was born into a Ghana/ Africa that was theistic and remains so, if not more so today. The anchor of that paper was my belief in the oneness of the human family and the sacredness of the human being. My stance as far as the scope of the humanities goes is therefore one that says whatever else is excluded, the sacredness of the human must remain with the *a priori* affirmation of “the beyond” in our life together. Whatever African myths of origins one picks, the message is clear: human beings have a special place in creation and special links with a Source or Ground of Being which demands a special relationship of responsibility and answerability when it comes to other human-beings and the rest of creation. Our primal imagination moves us to see “The Beyond” as demanding that we promote community, what we have come to describe as “the communal ideology of Africa”. The well being of all creation is therefore in our hands. The basic human ethic of the “golden rule” should cover not only inter-personal and human relations but also our dealings with the rest of creation. The humanities, therefore, have to be concerned with all aspects of creation and should champion interdisciplinary learning. The ethics of euthanasia, in-vitro fertilization,

genetic modification of plants and animals and the exploitation of the rest of creation should all be the concern of the humanities. The least we can do is to ask questions concerning the ends of our acts so that in all things we can “proceed with integrity”.

The Humanities are concerned with human culture—all that we human beings have “cultured”, fine arts and language and protocols. What we have made out of and because of our environment and life together should all be part of our concern. We are duty bound to move generations to reflect on their choices and their actions. Humanities link chronologically to the departed, the living and the yet-to-be born. This makes both history and imagination the concern of the humanities. Without the past we cannot appropriate the present and without imagination we cannot transform our present nor strive for a different future. Concern with human culture and with our being as persons in community links the humanities closely to the Social Sciences, and that closeness is already observable in the choice that students make for their studies and their specializations.

### **Where are we?**

University faculties have become more complex and more variegated. Students used to classify themselves as either arts or science. Then the Social Sciences waded in to muddy the waters. From then on universities and their faculties have become more universal in their approach to learning. Today even history at this university has one foot in social science, geography has migrated altogether and so has law. Those who study Fine Arts, Classics, Languages, Philosophy, Linguistics and Religion find themselves on the margins. Not only are they ignorantly considered as “soft options”, but economically they are not the money-spinners. Look around this campus: who attracts funds to put up bigger and better facilities? Check graduate employment opportunities. I dare not pronounce on this, but I would like to see research done on the employability of our graduates: what fields and what employment? Whatever the findings, we cannot run away from the fact that our humanity and life in community will be the poorer if we neglect the humanities.

As persons in the humanities, do we see our intellectual enterprise as a worthwhile occupation? What do we contribute to our life together as Ghanaians, indeed, as members of the human community? Humanizing humanity is a task we cannot avoid, and yet like most such tasks, it is a thankless job, taken for granted and disparaged until we hit a rock that tells us we have fallen short. How often do we say, "How can this happen? How can people do such a thing? What went wrong?" Every time we say in Mfantse about a person, *ɔnye ne ho Nyimpa*, we are saying that, that person's demeanor falls short of what we in the Mfantse community associate with the identity and concept of being human. Given recent happenings in Ghana, Africa and the world, I would like to highlight three aspects of our human identity and community. These are language, religion and gender.

### Language

If we do not have adequate language we cannot communicate effectively. Conflict resolution, mediation, living with tension, all require delicacy of language. We speak a lot about living in harmony, reconciliation, compromises, dialogue, but one word said too soon or too crudely can derail all sophisticated planning. The task to accept and live with multiple perspectives requires language that communicates powerfully, clearly and felicitously. *"Language empowers and kills. Verbal language, with its attendant body language, can affirm, offer love, do ministry, and seek justice. Verbal and body language can likewise assault, maim, harm and kill. Language is essential in everything that we say, do, think, and display to others and ourselves about who we are."*<sup>4</sup>

Information is power and how we transmit it affects all human and community relations. The technology for doing so is available but the content of what we transmit depends upon the humanities. What does it take to create the programmes that go on air, what quality and to what purpose? Airtime is available, but who created the human rights principles and ideals that are transmitted? What philosophies and ideologies are being created and peddled by whom, and to what purpose? All of this is the arena of language, not to talk of the language of symbolism in fine arts and dance. Our identity as one nation is at times strained when we

stray into the arena of which language/s to promote or to teach. Whatever the linguistic vehicle, it must be able to carry what makes us distinctively Ghanaian, for that will be our contribution to the pool of human culture. Without our distinctive contribution we remain in the mimicking mode in which our contact with western culture has tried to place us.

### **Religion**

Critical to the humanities in Ghana today and tomorrow is the factor of religion. Religious visions enrich our sense of who we are as human beings. Religion is a two-edged sword that rules our individual and sometimes our community lives and interactions. I am still haunted by an article in *Cross Currents* by Julia Kasdorf that calls attention to the very laudable religious ideal of forgiveness.<sup>5</sup> You need to read this article which discusses how the principle of forgiveness worked out in an Amish community in the USA after an unspeakable atrocity had been perpetrated in a school.

Peace and harmony in many parts of this continent hang on inter-religious relations and the practice of religion by individuals and communities. Yet this is an area that the majority refuses to study, refuses to apply their rational faculties. They would rather mystify in order to hold others to ransom and in some cases to exploit them physically and financially. A radical transformation of our attitude to the study of religion has become necessary—not only the study of the phenomenon but also how it is utilized and how it acts in interpersonal relations.

The study of religion has to deal with real life issues. Human rights and Social Justice have to have cardinal points in the Study of Religion. Studying Religion is not just a study of the Bible, the Qur'an and other scriptures. Religion is a very complex mix that defies cryptic definition; all religions have a history, both in terms of the ideas and the practices. Religions are dynamic as generations and contexts appropriate or reject aspects and continue to transform them to meet contemporary yearnings. Shifts of meanings continue to occur, so there is much to challenge our intellect and our integrity in the study of Religion. Theology is no longer the queen of the sciences, but it has to be a faithful servant to all facets

of the humanities. Religion could fuel our imagination as we seek new directions for the humanities in this university. We can begin even today with a research into the presence of religion on this university campus.

### **Mainstreaming Gender**

Obviously I do not dare to comment on the whole of the humanities, but I cannot exclude a comment on the challenge of gender from the studies of the humanities. Again, once requested for a paper on the Christian doctrine of Man, I agreed to write only if my formulation of the subject as “Feminism: a pre-condition for a Christian anthropology” would be accepted. How could I forget what the early church fathers had to say about women and “malestream” church theology’s approach to gender? How could I observe silence when I had just finished reading the Amish Story and am still wearing my black prayer bangles in memory of the so called ritual murders of women in this country? The humanities have to deal with the human, the anthropos, the human being, and not just vir, aner and man as in the human male. All studies of the humanities have to be inclusive.

Contemporary Ghana is a sphere of gender sensitivity and has many institutions that advocate gender justice. Gender is not the same as women, but by and large the issue is justice for women and an even playfield for women and men. There is no law against the education of women; in fact, there is a lot of pro-active rhetoric and even structures and provisions to encourage and enhance the education of women. “Send your girl child to school” evoked remarks like “who is the educated girl going to marry if the boy child is not sent to school?” as if anyone is saying sending girls to school entails keeping boys out of school or even that the educated girl child has to marry. Some even said the boy child has become an endangered specie. This dualistic way of reasoning is not serving us well. In a world where women constitute the only non-minority group that suffers bias regardless of cultural context, we cannot think of new directions in the humanities without intentionally reshaping our epistemics to include women’s perspectives and experiences.<sup>6</sup>



The programmes offered in our tertiary institutions have to consciously include the challenge of building a nation of women and men participating according to their ability. The curricula, especially in the humanities and social sciences, should incorporate issues raised by women. Scientific issues have to have women's perspectives. How a woman approaches crop science may differ from the concerns of a man. How HIV affects a woman may differ from how it affects a man. Most urgently needed is a study of masculinity.

Specific research into women in religion, women in history, women in law, women in culture, women in politics, women in the media and so on will yield material for policy oriented research that may feed into the crafting of legislation. Several NGO's have been researching on women in Ghanaian life; this has to be mainstreamed and supported in the context of tertiary education. The challenge is to receive women's experiences, lives and reflections as valid locus of epistemology. Reflections based on women's experience have yielded ideals such as inclusivity, respect of difference and plurality. These are facets of be-ing human that the humanities cannot ignore.

Women's leadership is being probed and the work that led to the Domestic Violence Act featured a lot of women's input. What has become evident is that all these efforts are to be formally inserted into tertiary education and funded. Individual lecturers have factored women and gender concerns into their offerings and many students are interested in researching women and/or gendered parameters in church, society, local history, the origins of cultural practices, etc. Tertiary education should be poised to give formal and effective support to this search. We have here a mine of intellectual concerns to offer students to grapple with. It is an urgent area and one that affects everybody.

### **Continuing Transforming Visions and Imagery**

Having commented on the areas of the humanities that I have been most concerned with, let me flag the fact that several papers of this colloquium will direct your attention to others. From Church History we in Christian studies shifted to the History of Christianity, Historiography

keeps changing and we need to probe the reasons for the changes and the purposes too. History too is dynamic; it presents us with aspects of continuity and changes. We may describe the past, but what we find can lead us to theories about our human be-ing. In the humanities we need those who will diligently foster our historical consciousness, because it is indispensable that we should know that ideas are historically situated. We need to be aware of the cultural conditioning that created these ideas and circumstances. To proceed with integrity, we should never ignore the Akan proverb, *Asem ba a na wobu be...* There is no smoke without a fire.

We used to study English Literature but had to shift to “Literature in English” so we may study what our own African creative writers have contributed to that language. We studied Classics and Modern languages. Today African languages, including Arabic and Swahili, feature in our offerings. How are we going to communicate effectively in the African Union if we cannot talk to one another? Interpreters and translators are not born; they are made, and who but the humanities can lay the ground for this service?

### **What is at Stake**

We cannot deal with human rights without coming up against cultural and religious differences. The moral and ethical arguments in sciences, philosophy and psychology are all part of the task of the humanities. The religious argument that sympathy and compassion are defining characteristics of be-ing human should direct us to concerns beyond the boundaries of Ghana and Africa. After all, do we not have an Akan proverb that says there are no boundaries to humanity? There is a permanent challenge in the humanities between “the one” and “the many”, pluralism versus a monolithic and uni-vocal stance.

Debates on brain-drain become issues of migration in the context of globalization. How can you globalize the economy without globalizing politics and the movement of human beings? Whatever touches human beings is the concern of the humanities and we need imagination to make our contributions. The human factor is an inescapable one in life and we need imagination to dream up what it means to be human and to structure

how to locate that within the study of universal factors. "All our human worlds are products of our human imagination."

This 60th anniversary of the University of Ghana, Legon, affords us the opportunity to exercise our imagination. When I came to Legon in September of 1959, almost half a century ago, there were 40 of us women at what we were to name Volta Hall. The first court was ready; the second court was being built. Volta Hall has changed; the women have spilled over into other halls. Legon has changed physically and qualitatively. Academic offerings that did not exist, like computer studies, are now commonplace. This colloquium is an occasion for us to dream creatively so that come the next 25 years those walking these streets and corridors will have a quality of life that befits our human nature. In Christianity we see human beings as made in the image of God, only a step away from the divine, and the Akan say *Nipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma*, thus fit for all respect and honour. We need to work towards creating an environment that will make this glorious affirmation a reality in our future. New directions for the humanities will have to be anchored firmly on our growing understanding of what it means to be fully and truly human.

I thank you.

### Endnotes

- <sup>2</sup> See Oduyoye, "Hearing and Knowing", 1986, Orbis Books, Chp.10.
- <sup>3</sup> The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles. Ed. Lesley Brown. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, 1993 p.1276.
- <sup>4</sup> Cheryl A. Kirk Duggan, "The language of Invitation", *Cross Currents*, Fall 2007, P. 349.
- <sup>5</sup> Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "To Pasture Amish Forgiveness: Silence and the West Nicked, Mines school shootings", *Cross Currents*, Fall 2007, pp. 328-345.
- <sup>6</sup> Melanie L. Harris "Womanist Humanities, A Deeper look", *Cross Currents* Fall 2007, pp.391-403.