

## **THE QUESTION OF MAN IN THE LIGHT OF OUR SHARED HUMANITY: RELEVANCE TO THE NEED TO COMBAT DEHUMANISING PRACTICES IN NIGERIA THROUGH EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

The question of man is the ultimate metaphorical question and has been a pressing issue in the mind of humanity since time immemorial. Quite often, the focus of the question has been placed on the differences between man and lower animals. But existential peril awaits the collective future of humanity if man continues in the habit of looking at himself in terms of his differences from fellow men! This paper looks at the question of man from various conceptions of “man” and seeks to address the question in the light of our shared humanity. It advances the argument that a whole range of issues happening in Nigeria, as well as in other countries – from debt bondage, human trafficking, early marriage, child labour, corruption by the political class to ethnic stereotyping and the assigning of ethnic labels – are inferiorising acts that inadvertently eviscerate the humanity of whole groups because they are not “like us”. It is suggested that the school system should provide structured opportunities for the learning of shared humanity – a humanity that implies that all human beings have the same basic physical and psychological needs; and that our education should seek to conscientiously break down barriers and stereotypes by providing students the structured opportunities to step out of their social and ethnic enclaves, mix up, talk with each other and share their respective stories.

**Keywords: The Question of Man, Our Common Humanity, Our Shared Humanity, Dehumanisation**

### **Introduction**

There have been different attempts aimed at addressing the question of man: biblical, archaeological, philosophical, biological, anthropological, religious, social, etc. The question of man is the question about his origin, his beliefs, his humanity, his uniqueness among all creatures, his place in the cosmos and the values he cherishes. The question of man, in this context, is less on the differences between us and others and more on our collective humanity. When the focus of the question is on ourselves in terms of our differences from other people, we get in danger of inferiorising such other people as mere objects and ultimately dehumanising them. This tendency is what in the course of history has opened the door to let in such crimes against humanity as were committed under the anti-Semitic leader of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler, who considered Jews an inferior race, an alien threat to German racial purity and community, and subsequently directed a systematic state-sponsored extermination of six million Jews and some five million others in what is today called the Holocaust (History.com Editors, 2021). Racial segregation, the practice of

restricting people to certain circumscribed areas of residence or to separate institutions and facilities on the basis of race or alleged race, is also a dehumanising practice arising from this tendency. Racial segregation was practiced with extreme rigour in South Africa, where, under the apartheid system, it was an official government policy from 1950 until the early 1990s (Britannica, n.d.).

Though there have been commendable developments like the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the signing of the Geneva Conventions (1949), the world is still far from seeing the last of such atrocious acts against humanity as ethnic cleansing, torture, sexual violence, enslavement, ethnic and racial persecution, deportation, enforced disappearance (United States Institute of Peace, 2008). This then is the problem of this paper. The purpose of the paper is to rely on philosophical analysis to address the question of man in the light of our collective humanity focusing on how education can be a tool in the fight against acts of dehumanisation. The paper will be of great significance to educational policy-makers to reform the school system for the provision of structured opportunities for the teaching and learning of our shared humanity.

### **The Question of Man**

The question of man is the ultimate metaphysical question with a history going back to the classical era. Socrates (470–399 BC) defined man as the species that creates ideas. Men thrive on ideas and live by their wits, not by their brute strength. The Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 BC), a student of Socrates, once declared that the best definition of man was a "featherless biped" (Yudkowsky, 2008). In **Diogenes Laërtius'** third-century *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, **Plato** was applauded for his definition, whereupon **Diogenes the Cynic** plucked off the feathers of a life cock, brought the cock to Plato's school, and said "Here is Plato's man". The Platonists promptly changed their definition to "a featherless biped with broad nails".

Plato went on to describe human nature by his theory of forms. He described man as having four aspects or dimensions: the logical form, the epistemological form, the moral form and the metaphysical form (Cyrene, 2016). The logical form describes the physical being, the physical form and its identity. Each human being has characteristic physical features by which he can be identified as a member of the genus Homo and he has very specific features that establish his identity that is shared by all the members of the species known as Homo sapiens. The epistemological form is related to the theory of knowledge. It describes the possible kinds of knowledge and the degrees of certainty for each kind of knowledge. Plato described the kind of knowledge that man can acquire through education, a process of learning from sensory experience, and the teachings imparted by others. The moral form describes qualities such as courage and justice, the observable aspects of human nature described from human action and human behaviour while the metaphysical form, according to Plato, is not perceivable by any of the senses. The metaphysical form is the real form of man as compared to the logical form which is considered to be unreal. The metaphysical form is not present in space or time, as it is beyond the world of changeable and perishable things. It belongs to the realm of unchanging, eternal forms – the world of form.

Aristotle the legendary Greek philosopher, a student of Plato, defined man as a rational animal repeatedly stressing rationality as the crucial differentiating characteristic of human beings (Kietzmann, 2019). The field of philosophy has since evolved to understand man in two principal ways: **materialism**, according to which man is composed of nothing more than material components. His intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects are nothing but products of his material nature acting according to the rules of physics, chemistry and biology; and **idealism**, the school of thought according to which man is essentially a spiritual being, and his physical body is foreign to his essence. The body is nothing but a shell for the spirit or the intellect.

However, the Christian perspective on the question of man takes the two dimensions together – the material and the spiritual – and goes further to assert that man was created by God in His own image. Man as a living being created in the “image of God” is a Biblical doctrine regarding the nature and purpose of mankind, according to Philips (2021). In the Christian school of thought, man created in the image (or likeness) of God means that man was granted a particular likeness to God at creation. This image of God is understood to mean the qualities that make man human – for example: possessing a soul, higher-order reasoning, self-consciousness, consciousness of God and the ability to have a relationship with Him (Enns, 2010). However, the exact meaning of the phrase, the image (or likeness) of God, has been a subject for great debates for philosophers and theologians for millennia. It has been argued in some quarters that being made in the Image of God does not mean that God has man-like features but that the statement is a figurative language for God bestowing special honour on mankind, which He withheld from conferring on other creatures. Yet, in other quarters, the argument has been that it is consciousness and the ability to speak which is the “image of God” – i.e. the faculties which differentiate mankind from animals, and allow man to grasp abstract concepts and ideas without having to rely merely on instincts. The argument for the statement being a figurative language is buttressed in the light of Genesis 5:1–2 declares: “This is the roll of Adam's descendants: On the day that God created Adam he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them. He blessed them and gave them the name Man, when they were created” (New Jerusalem Bible). The “image of God” cannot therefore simultaneously refer to both the masculine features of one human being (male) and the feminine features of the other (female).

**The Biblical doctrine** that man is a child of the creative powers of a supernatural entity (God) presents itself as diametrically opposed to the Modern Evolutionary Theory, which explains the diversity of life without recourse to the doctrine of God or any other divine power. The first underpinnings for the theory of human evolution were provided by the English naturalist, Charles Darwin, who, in his book “On the Origin of the Species” published in 1859, explained that organisms evolved over time and space into different species, which share a common ancestral population. Since the publication of the book, findings from many fields are reported to have greatly expanded on his ideas and to have corroborated that man is a product of an evolutionary process that goes back more than 3.5 billion years, to the beginning of life on earth. Man became human gradually, evolving new physical traits and behaviours on top of those inherited from earlier primates, mammals, vertebrates and the very oldest living organisms. The theory is said to be one of the best substantiated theories in the history of the scientific world

(Than & Taylor, 2021) supported by evidence solidly established by extensive studies in such several scientific disciplines as physical anthropology, primatology, archaeology, palaeontology, evolutionary psychology, ethology, neurobiology, embryology, genetics, linguistics, zoology and molecular biology (Heng, 2009, and Scientific American, 2002).

Contrary to common wrongly-held views, human evolution, according to Scientific American (2002), does not teach that humans descended from monkeys but that humans share a common ancestor with monkeys, apes and chimpanzees. Humans and monkeys are both primates but evolved differently from that same ancestor. All apes and monkeys share a more distant relative, which lived about 25 million years ago (Smithsonian Institution, 2020). **Human evolution can therefore be defined as** the process by which human beings evolved from lower primates, which are now-extinct, to the Homo sapiens as a distinct species of the hominid family, which includes the great apes.

### **Man and Lower Animals**

The question of man has also been attempted by man looking at himself in terms of the traits and characteristics unique to him as the highest form of life. Though human beings look a lot like lower primates – having five-digit hands and feet, thoughtful eyes, lean, muscular physiques, lungs, a heart, a brain, a nervous system, and all those other features which they share with other mammals – man is a unique animal. Man is capable of analytical thoughts. He can analyse difficult issues, come up with intelligent solutions, and is able to reason and engage in philosophising about a metaphysical issue like “the question of man”. The reasoning powers in lower animals are limited, and so philosophising about a metaphysical issue like “the Question of Lions”, for example, is out of the question for lions.

Possessing true language and abstract thoughts, according to Stewart (n.d.), is exclusive to man. Man is also an **economic being** – capable of transacting complicated commercial operations; an **aesthetic being** – capable of perceiving and appreciating beauty and intangible values; an **ethical being** – able to distinguish right from wrong; a **religious being** – being the only animal whose members can seek a divine relationship with a deity; a **historical creature** – being the only creature that records events in his life for the enlightenment of future generations; an **epistemological being** – being the only creature that seeks knowledge for his economic and social security as well as for the sake of it; an **“upright” being** – being the only creature with an erect stature that walks upright. Man has established societies, created civilisation, and other things that have improved the standard of living of humans in the societies so established (Space Coast Daily, 2019), which cannot be said of lower animals. For Christians, man as a unique creature goes a million steps beyond just a creature having some traits and characteristics that are universally accepted as unique to him: Man exists as a being uniquely created in the image of God. According to Christians, “Man’s image is not of himself; he also shares a likeness to his Creator” (Sailhamer, 1992, p. 97), which is unlike what can be said of any other animal.

### **Man and Society**

Biological and psychological circumstances compel the necessity for man to live in society. According to Spirkin (1983), man becomes aware of himself only as part of the

social whole. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle remarked that man is a social animal; and that he, who by nature and not by mere accident, is “society-less” is either a beast or God; and “he is the ‘Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one’ whom Homera denounces—the outcast who is a lover of war; he may be compared to a bird which flies alone” (Online Library of Liberty, 2021, para. 1). As a social animal, man can only acquire the qualities that define his humanity from society, and without a social environment – be it a family, a village or a country – nothing meaningful would be brought to the description and definition of man as the highest level of development of all living organisms on earth.

“Society” holds an integral place in the identity formation for the African man. In the African philosophy, to be a man is associated with society and is expressed in the relations that one has with his community. Thus, the individual and society are both tied in the same fate. The individual is seen as constituted by society and as one with society. Whatever happens to him happens to the whole society. According to Mboya (1963), as cited by Nnodim (2018), a “person is an individual only to the extent that he is a member of a clan, a community or a family” (p. 164-165). Mbiti (1970) echoed the claims; “Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people” (as cited by Musana, 2018, p. 22). Thinking along the same lines, Archbishop Desmond Tutu once observed:

A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human (Tutu, 2004, p. 25).

### **The Question of Man in the Light of Our Shared Humanity**

In view of the preceding section, to be human means to live in a society and to nurture the growth and survival of that society. One important way to nurture the survival of human society is recognising the common humanity of all members of society. Recognising our shared humanity is all about creating a humanised society. To “humanise” is to make something friendlier to humans. “Humanising” makes things more civilised, refined, and understandable. To “humanise” is therefore to make things more humane and easier for humans to relate to and appreciate. “Our common humanity” in the context of having a humanised society is the understanding that unpleasant feelings are part of the human experience and that suffering is universal. According to Iwanusa (2015), humans are connected not only by the joys in their lives but are also connected in their struggles, heartaches, and fears. Recognising our common humanity is a key component in what connects men as they live and work together in society. Our shared sense of humanity is the central wellspring of value and meaning in the world. Our ability to imagine and empathise with the physical and emotional pains of other humans determines the success of man’s efforts to humanise his world.

According to Neff (2021), the recognition of our common humanity also allows men to be more understanding and less judgmental about our inadequacies. Our thoughts, feelings and actions are largely impacted by factors outside of our control: parenting history, culture, genetic, geographical and environmental conditions, as well as the demands and expectations of others. Many aspects of ours and the circumstances of our lives are not of

our intentional making or choosing, but instead stem from innumerable factors beyond our sphere of influence. Our common humanity is all about the physical and psychological needs we share and nothing about our personal or group differences

### **Humanism: Our Common Humanity in the Context of Global Vision and Efforts**

The United Nations has been credited with landmark accomplishments in the promotion of our shared humanity with special focus on supporting peace and security, promoting and protecting human rights, fostering economic and social development, and shaping international law (United Nations Department of Global Communications, 2020). When the Charter of the United Nations was signed in 1945 by 51 countries representing all the continents of the world, paving the way for the creation of the United Nations on 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1945, the Charter incorporated the Statute of the International Court of Justice. The aim of the Charter is to save humanity from wars; to reaffirm human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person; to proclaim the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small; and to promote the prosperity of all humankind.

There are also humanist movements, many of which are international in scope and operation, calling for the advancement of rights for all peoples. These movements are inspired by the humanist conviction that all men are bound together by a common humanity despite their varied conditions and traumas. **Humanism** operates as a progressive philosophy of life which, having no recourse to the supernatural conception of reality, affirms the ability and responsibility of all human beings everywhere to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good (American Humanist Association, 2021). It is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion rather than by revelation from a supernatural source to understand the world. It affirms the dignity of each human being, it registers its calls for the affirmation of the full humanity, the equal human dignity, of those who have been marginalised and excluded, and it supports the maximisation of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility.

Humanist movements like American Humanist Association advocate the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Humanists International, an international non-governmental organisation championing secularism and human rights, campaigns internationally on issues directly related to human rights with a specific emphasis on defending the freedom of thought and expression and the rights of the non-religious, who are often a vulnerable minority in many parts of the world (Humanists International, n.d.). The organisation is based in London but maintains a presence at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, among other international institutions. They operate a global campaign for everyone to live a life of dignity in a world where universal human rights are respected and protected, and where states uphold secularism.

### **The Question of Man – Some Dehumanising Practices in Nigeria**

Human dignity is the main philosophical concept at the centre of human rights, as expressed in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many

other documents. According to Nowak (2010), human dignity is what distinguishes human beings from other animals. However, there are instances when individuals act to degrade the dignity of other individuals by viewing and treating them as though they lacked the mental capacities that are commonly attributed to human beings (Netzer, 2018). This then is the meaning of dehumanisation – the tendency to view and treat other individuals or groups as though they do not quite belong to the human race. It leads to the “rational” conclusion that it is not necessary to treat “them” as if they were like “us” or to be concerned with what they might be suffering if they were truly human beings (The Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential, n.d.).

Nigeria has a long history with a whole range of dehumanising practices. Though slavery is most often spoken of in terms of events in the historical past, slavery still exists – in many other forms. “Modern-day slavery” is a term for the dehumanising practice where individuals harshly exploit other people for their commercial or personal gain.

- **Debt bondage** is a form of modern-day-slavery coercion or deception, and a practice which typically involves restricted freedom of human rights (Harris, 2017). In Nigeria, it occurs when an individual trapped in poverty borrows money and becomes a slave for protracted periods of time working for nothing other than to repay the debt.
- **Human trafficking** is another form of modern slavery in Nigeria, which is where people are tricked, threatened or coerced into situations that make it possible for them to be exploited. These individuals are then sold on, either remaining within their country or shipped across international borders. Human trafficking is a gateway offence and often results in further exploitation of the victims. Parents in the country have on many occasions been reported as being involved in the trafficking of their own children because of the dire economic straits they have found themselves trapped in.
- **Sex trafficking**, a form of human trafficking occurs when women or girls are forced to engage in commercial sex acts. Those living in extreme poverty are particularly vulnerable to this practice because of their economic marginalisation and lack of education. They can be lured overseas through false employment opportunities. Victims suffer physical and psychological trauma and potential legal charges. For years, local and international media have been full to overflowing with lurid and gut-wrenching stories of Nigerian women and girls trafficked for sexual and labour exploitation, and of migrants trapped in Libya in slavery-like conditions or dying as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Human Rights Watch, 2019).
- **Early marriage is also a prevalent practice in Nigeria. Forced and early marriage** is where someone is married against their will and cannot leave the marriage (Pater, 2021). Forced marriage can also happen, according to Harris (2018), when a wife is married in exchange for payment. This practice is characterised by a lack of consent by at least one party. Two motivations for this type of slavery are cultural tradition and material deprivations. Forced marriage of a child under the age of eighteen is called early marriage, and is very common some northern parts of Nigeria. Girls are more common targets for this because they can be controlled through sexual violence. Girls who fall victim to early marriage are more likely to be victims of domestic violence and are highly vulnerable to Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF) and to sexually transmitted infections,

including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV); and face a high risk of complications that sometimes result in death during pregnancy or childbirth (International Women's Health Coalition, 2021).

- **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)** involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The practice has no health benefits for girls and women. FGM can cause severe bleeding and problems urinating, and later cysts, infections, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of new-born deaths (World Health Organisation, 2020). The practice is recognised internationally as a violation of human rights of girls and women and as an extreme form of gender discrimination, reflecting deep-rooted inequality between the sexes (World Health Organisation, 2020). The practice is still prevalent in about 30 countries around the world including Nigeria. In 2018, the National Bureau of Statistics and United Nations Children's Fund, in a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey for 2016-17, released statistics which revealed that 8.4% of women aged 15-49 years reported to have undergone some form of FGM and that 25.3% of daughters aged 0-14 years reported to have undergone some form of FGM (United Kingdom Home Office, 2019). FGM is supported by some traditionalists in Nigeria because they see it as a necessary rite of passage into womanhood. FGM is also practised to allay the fears in some Nigerian traditional societies that women might become sexually promiscuous or unfaithful to their husbands without the partial or total removal of their external genitalia.
- **Domestic servitude** is a form of labour exploitation where victims, pressured into performing housework, have their liberties restricted. This dehumanisation practice covers live-in help like maids, housekeepers, nannies and care-givers.
- **Conscription of children as soldiers** is another act of dehumanisation found in Nigeria, particularly as perpetrated by Boko Haram insurgents in the north-east of the country.
- **Corruption by the political class** breeds dehumanisation. The powerful political class get richer at a great cost to the vast mass of the population of the country who remain trapped in dehumanising conditions occasioned by the poverty ensuing therefrom. Therefore, a lot of dehumanising issues noticed and recorded about the nation – from terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, sex trafficking, forced and early marriages, child labour – have their base in corruption by the privileged few.
- **Ethnic stereotyping and assigning of derogatory ethnic labels** are all forms of dehumanisation. Nigeria, as a multi-cultural society, is made up of people from more than 300 ethnic groups – the dominant of the groups being Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. Unfortunately, each of these ethnic groups has become a victim of some stereotypes and a subject for an assigning of dehumanising ethnic labels by people of other ethnic groups. For example, a person that belongs to the northern part of the country – be he or she from the middle-belt or the far north – is stereotyped as being of the Hausa ethnic group by some – but not all – groups in the south of the country. Dehumanising representations of groups by ethnic labels on the back of real or imagined traits associated with such groups have become imbedded in the psyche of many citizens of the country. Overtime, there have been such derogatory labels like “Yorubbers” or



“Yorubastard”; and “Biafraud”; “Terrorists” slapped on Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa respectively by members of various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The dehumanising practice of using stereotypes against certain people is detrimental to our collective humanity and to the vision of Nigeria as a country where “Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress” reign.

- **Ethnic Discrimination** is a form of dehumanisation related to decisions made or actions taken based on a prejudiced or prejudicial outlook of a person’s ethnicity. It involves unfair or differential treatment due to one’s membership of an ethnic group (Contrada, Ashmore, Gary, Coups, Egeth, Sewell, Ewell, Goyal & Chasse, 2000 as cited by Torres, Bird & Mata-Greve, 2020). In Nigeria, as well as in other countries, ethnic discrimination encompasses several types of experiences ranging from systemic or structural inequities to subtle and covert forms of everyday discrimination that occur at an interpersonal level. By “systemic or structural inequities”, who gets what job or who occupies what political office in the country, for example, is purely determined by the political power structures on the basis of ethnicity or state of origin.

### **Education for Our Shared Humanity**

The challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global society require new skills from individuals. These were summarised in a report published by the UNESCO in 2011 as follows: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. These are collectively called the “UNESCO Four Pillars of Learning”, and, according to UNESCO (2011), are at a time when the identification and the understanding of these four pillars of learning seem more relevant than ever, learning to live together for the advancement of our common humanity must be accorded the top priority status.

Learning to live together has been proposed and described as the foundation of education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This can be achieved in Nigeria, as can be achieved elsewhere, by education consciously being structured in the direction of developing in individuals an understanding of others and their history, languages, traditions and spiritual values and, on this basis, creating in them a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence, our common humanity and the challenges of our collective future, would induce them to implement common projects for the effective management of our diversity for national integration.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The question of man, particularly in the light of our shared humanity, is about mutual understanding with a view to minimising the tendency of man to focus heavily on his differences from others – a tendency that holds the potential to open the door for barbarous acts of inhumanity by man against man such as the holocaust in Nazi Germany and the Rwanda Genocide of 1994. Recognising our shared humanity invites attention to the uniqueness and humanity of man among all animals. Education can provide the structure required for students to build compassion and empathy for people within the social environments they find themselves in: their families, their classes and their schools.

In the process, they can develop critical thinking skills while they mature ethically and learn to take responsible decisions. Through joint projects in their instructional environments, they can build a sense of common humanity and come to understand that their actions have implications for the world beyond them and for the world around them. Consequently, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. Our school system should provide structured opportunities for the learning of shared humanity – a humanity that implies that all human beings have the same basic physical and psychological needs.
2. Our education should seek to conscientiously break down barriers and stereotypes by providing students the structured opportunity to step out of their social and ethnic enclaves, mix up, talk with each other and share their respective stories.
3. The curriculum – beginning at the primary level – should be structured to reflect an integrated framework of education that radically advances the interests of peace, respect for human rights and active citizenship
4. A compulsory subject, like Social Studies, Civic Education or Peace, Resolution for the discovery of others in terms of their culture, history and language should be introduced (where not offered) in schools and colleges.
5. Since it is never too late for anybody to learn, the practice of exempting some categories of persons from the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) on the grounds of age should be discontinued. The scheme should therefore afford all categories of persons regardless of age the opportunity to experience Nigeria beyond their states of origin.
6. Instructions in schools should involve visits – i.e. excursions – to different states for pupils and students to be able to develop an appreciation of the diversity of Nigeria.
7. Lecturers on sabbatical leave of absence are encouraged to spend the period outside their regions of birth in the interest of cultural exchange and in places where they can help young people to gain the skills to prevent and resolve inter-personal conflicts without having to resort to violence or succumb to abusive pressure from peers or partners.

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