There is an enormous cluster of words all emerging from or connected with the term human. It is useful to examine some of the cluster in order to gain greater understanding of the emerging concept of Humanity.

The first thing is to resume the inquiry into the definition of the term human itself, first taken up in the introduction. According to an ordinary dictionary, such as the Webster’s New Collegiate (1949), which is the edition I used when I first started teaching, human derives from the Latin humanus, and means “belonging or relating to man; characteristic of man.” Man, in turn, comes from the Anglo-Saxon and is defined as “a human being; esp., a male human being.” What are we to make of this usual roundabout and tautological way of defining a word, so often encountered in any dictionary? It is worth initially noting the gender problem: as we have noted before, men, it is implied, define the human condition. The issue of human rights, in which women are equal to men, is unresolved in the initial definition of what it is to be human.

Obviously, the word is a European one, reflecting the Latin beginnings of what has come to be called western civilization. In other societies and cultures, literally hundreds of them, we encounter other terms for what in English is called human. In
some of these other cultures, a human is defined as that which is “us” and not other people. Here we meet with a huge research topic, into which I will not plunge further in this venue. Instead, having flagged the matter, I will turn back to the western usage.

Let us next consult the OED, a historical dictionary often regarded as authoritative. Under Human (n) we find “1. A human being; a member of the human race, first used in 1533.” It is further defined as “(a) the human race, humanity.” Such is the noun. The adjectival form is actually more interesting. The first citation informs us that human means “of, belonging to, or characteristic of mankind, distinguished from animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright posture.” The first usage given is 1378, followed by 1475. Here, then, we have the notion of humans as separated from animals. This separation was not broken down officially until Linnaeus and Darwin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but was brought into question unofficially much earlier. The implication is that man, to follow such linguistic usage, is a beast who can behave bestially (while aspiring to be an angel).

Under 3.a. we find “as distinguished from God or superhuman beings . . . mundane; secular. (Often opposed to divine.).” According to the OED this is first presumably employed around 1533. Thus the picture darkens. Humans are either not animals or a special kind of one, but they are also marked off from the gods. They are to be thought of in secular terms as a subject of study—the human sciences?—a study that claims that the gods are created by man. Here we are in the realm of anthropology and biology, in which the human is a member of the classification Homo sapiens. In this sense it is proper to speak of the human race, even though this opens the proverbial can of worms and can be a prelude to racist thought—one of the primary challenges to the concept of Humanity.

A preliminary summary: in seeking to understand what it is to be human we must note its inclination, historically, to a masculine attachment, and its affinity to the racial and the biological