

III Seven propositions of Christian Humanism

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“Christian Humanism” is a term that we come across often in Sophia-related documents, as for example the University Guide. It expresses the central idea as to how the activities of the University ought to be oriented, and thereby provides us with an appropriate guiding principle for our educational policy. The significance of this term can never be underrated. Care should be taken to see that our students acquire a suitable grasp of it, for failure to do so would indicate a serious lapse on our part.

This chapter elucidates the meaning and import of Christian Humanism by analyzing selected biblical passages and probing the links between the terms “humanism” and “Christian.” We shall later see how this expression blossomed and bore fruit in the history of Christian thought, and finally using seven propositions or premises, we shall seek to clarify its meaning.

1 Sources of Humanism in the Bible

■ Humanism and atheism

The Random House English Dictionary defines Humanism in three ways. It could be any system or mode of thought or action in which human interests, values, and dignity are given primary importance, as in moral judgments. It could be

devotion to or study of the Humanities, or it could refer to the studies, principles, or culture of the Humanists. In other words, human interests, values, dignity, and grace are considered as constituting the core of its thought and behavior patterns. People in general accept this definition of Humanism, and hence to qualify it with the word "Christian" may perhaps seem odd. My reason for saying so is because in religion it is not the human being but God who ought to take precedence. That is, an existence transcending human beings should constitute the core. In fact, it is for this reason that many in history rejected the type of Humanism that focuses on human affairs, and they did so in order to stress the fact that it is God who ought to be the focus of interest. In contrast to such thinking that prevailed among the Christians, we know that in the 19th century there arose people who stressed the denial of God, and who repudiated Christianity. Men like Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche symbolized this atheistic trend. For them, to quote Nietzsche, "we have to kill god in order to raise man."

This type of atheistic Humanism pervaded the world during the 19th and 20th centuries. Nietzsche's ideas gave rise to Nazism and Marx's ideas resulted in Stalinism. Due to its having spawned such inhumane tendencies that led to untold loss of life, in today's world such atheistic Humanism has declined, and people have strongly begun to feel the need to rebuild the foundations of Humanism and reconsider its links to Christianity.

■ The Bible and Humanism

There are many sentences in the Bible that may serve as sources of Humanism, and so I shall consider only the four that are most important.

- (1) God created human beings in his own image. (Genesis 1:27)
- (2) God our Savior wants all human beings to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:4)
- (3) The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:14)

- (4) Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5:15)

Let us now see how these four sentences are linked to Humanism. According to the first, every one of us, all mankind, was made in the image of God. In other words, as images of God we have received life and existence through God himself. Accordingly, the Eternal God himself affirms mankind's value, a God whose saving will is stronger than all the sins and disasters of humanity. As stated in the second sentence, the will of God which desires that all human persons be saved from sin and death is everlasting, and as stated in the third and fourth sentences, in realizing God's will, the Word, the only Son of God, became a human being and died, offering his life for all. In the Bible the death of Christ is always linked to his resurrection, to his new life beyond death. The existence of Jesus, who died and was resurrected for mankind and who thus participated in the Eternal Life of God as a human being, clearly exemplifies the fact that God loves all mankind.

This thought found in the Bible certainly can become the basis for affirming the value of every human being, and it may also constitute the source of a humanistic way of thinking and behavior. Yet, in the same Bible are to be found also certain sentences that appear not to be humanistic. This is the reason why a great deal of time had to elapse before Christian Humanism could bud forth from the fundamental Biblical ideas presented in the four sentences above, and flourish like a tree. Let us now consider the growth of humanistic thought in the history of Christianity.

2 Humanism as observed in Christian history

■ Appearance of Christian Humanism

On studying the history of Christianity, we see that from ancient times a way of thinking that resembled Humanism appeared in the thought of the early Greek

Christian theologians. Irenaeus of the second century believed that the entire history of the human race, from the first human being until the end of the world, is a salvation history for mankind, consistently led on by the love of God. God created human persons in order to grant them his blessing and save them. When by yielding to sin they submitted to the destiny of death, God sent his own Son and the Holy Spirit for human salvation. Starting with Adam, God desires to unite all mankind under the sole leadership of Jesus Christ, and this activity of God is a process that leads mankind to eternal life. In fact, the glory of God is a human being fully alive (*Gloria Dei, homo vivens*). These words of Irenaeus may well be viewed as a password for Christian Humanism. That is to say, rather than praising or exalting God in words, activating all human potential granted by God to the maximum, constitutes his glory. Hence, glorifying God would mean to enhance the life of human persons in all its aspects. It is not to view human beings as something paltry or to denigrate their talents. Of course, Irenaeus insisted also that to be truly alive it was essential to have a proper relationship with God. Hence, he adds the following words to the sentence just quoted: the life of man consists in seeing God (*Vita autem hominis visio Dei*).

Another Greek theologian who professed a humanistic type of thought was Origen of the third century. He saw the history of the entire cosmos as a process of education for mankind, created by the good God. The human person has been endowed with free will, and by accepting this education the individual ought to voluntarily choose the good and carry it out. Through this process of educative cleansing that continues even beyond death, ultimately all mankind will come to choose the good and live in union with the good God. Origen speaks of this universal salvation not as an assertion but a hope, and this type of phenomenal hope has been evinced by other Greek theologians as well, such as Gregory of Nyssa.

Nevertheless, when we come to the Latin theologian Augustine, we see that this type of positive Humanism is no more. According to Augustine, the human race, contaminated by original sin and condemned by God, is a mass of evil hastening

towards sin. Out of those unable to love in the proper way God has chosen a few, and by the power of the Holy Spirit he has moved their wills and evoked within them a change of heart. God will lead these chosen ones to love and eternal life, since they have been elected to receive it. The axiom that there is no salvation outside the Church (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*) took on a harsh significance in the thought of Augustine. His idea that pagans should be compelled by state law to join the Church, and his belief that non-Christian religious practices should be banned in countries where Christianity was the state religion (a notion in vogue among Christians of that time), were predictable results of such thinking. His clear and deep insights into the darkness of sin operating in the midst of human existence and history are indeed of primary importance, yet this type of thinking differs greatly from Humanism which concentrates on the common values found in all human beings.

In the West, during the Middle Ages, owing to the strong influence of Augustine's teaching, Humanism could not flourish. More than the freedom and rights of the individual, emphasis was placed on the rules and regulations of society and the Catholic Church. Those who deviated from the doctrine of the Church were subjected to trial and some were even condemned to death, for preservation of the social order took precedence over the protection of human rights. Accordingly, we may say that the Christian society of that period lacked Christian Humanism.

■ Restoration of Christian Humanism

During the renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries, when the world of ancient Greece and Rome was highlighted once more, the Christian Humanism of the Greek theologians that had blossomed earlier received an opportunity to flower again. In Europe, the return to human understanding as proposed by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, and the appreciation of the beauty of the human body as revealed in Ancient Art, gave birth to a thinking that focused on

human values, grace, and dignity. Among humanists of that day, there were some who while stressing the human person tended to be diffident towards Christianity, but there were others who imbued by deep faith in Christ gave rise to a way of thinking that emphasized the value and dignity of the human person. Among these we have Nicolaus Cusanus, Thomas More, and Erasmus. These were men motivated by a deep faith in Jesus Christ. They pursued the lifestyle spoken of by Christ in the Gospel, they earnestly sought the reform of the Church of their time, which was marked by a thirst for money and power, but at the same time they strove hard to avoid squabbles, conflicts or divisions. Moved by a desire for dialogue and an attitude of pacific persuasion, they even made efforts to reach out to Muslims, who in those days launched violent attacks against the Christian nations. Hence, the 15th and 16th centuries were a delightful springtime for Christian Humanism, though sad to say, the history that followed was not in accordance with the ideas of these scholars.

The 16th century was the time of the protestant reformation. This reformation was humanistic in the sense that it emphasized the freedom of individual Christians in relation to the Church. But at the same time it also stressed the corruption of human beings who had been tainted by original sin, proposed the doctrine of predestination, and thereby rejected the idea that individuals of their own free will could cooperate with the grace of God. This type of thinking was far removed from Humanism, and more akin to that of Augustine and the medieval thinkers.

The rupture of the one Church brought about by the reformation came as a shock to the Catholic Church, which, utilizing its own authority and that of the state, sought to impel Christians still within its fold to follow its directions. Thus, it rejected the notion of religious freedom, gave its assent to religious wars, and denied its followers the liberty to read books in which the content differed from Church teachings. After the 16th century, the Church, renewed by the Council of Trent, embarked upon a mission of world evangelization, and did indeed produce results. Yet, it refused to acknowledge the efforts of missionaries who sought to

learn from cultures that differed from that of the Christian West. Even in this age, an age we can hardly call humanistic, the educational system in Jesuit schools sought to develop mankind's reason, will, and feelings in a harmonious manner, and the so-called *Humanisme dévot*, the spiritual movement of 17th century France, sought a positive evaluation of Art, Literature, and so on; both to, an extent, reveal elements of Humanism. Yet, on considering the Christianity of this period as a whole, we are forced to admit that it was not the type to nurture the growth of Humanism.

■ Penetration of Christian Humanism

Humanistic thinking revived in the thought of the enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the French Revolution, and Liberalism, but in the Catholic Church it blossomed only in the 20th century and quickly became the mainstream of Catholic thinking.

The first to start such thinking was the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain. The views expressed in his *Humanisme Integral* were initially considered risky by some Catholics, yet they soon came to be followed by major Church leaders. Here the person who truly changed the outlook of the Church was Pope John the 23rd. In Church history, his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* was the first to address not just Catholics but all people of goodwill. This Pope, who loved all regardless of their religious beliefs or political affiliations as a father loved his children, shattered the hitherto closed and exclusive bearing of the Church. In fact, on hearing of his death, an Italian taxi-driver is said to have remarked, "This Pope made us feel that we are human persons." This remark gives us an idea of the impression he made upon people, for it was indeed as the taxi-driver had said.

The Second Vatican Council initiated by Pope John the 23rd clearly spelled out the issue of Humanism. This council, which among other things affirmed the unity of Christ with every human being, the work of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of all, a respect for all human rights including the right to freedom of religion, and

the fact that the joys and sorrows of all echo within the hearts of Christ's disciples, also insisted on a respect for all cultures and the need for their values to be incorporated into Christianity. Indeed, one might say that the Council overflowed with the spirit of Humanism.

The Popes who appeared after the Second Vatican Council also manifested a similar type of thinking. One of them, Pope John Paul the 2nd, during his first visit to Japan in 1981, stood at the site of the Cenotaph for Atomic Bomb Victims at the Hiroshima Peace Park and released in Japanese his monumental Peace Appeal by saying, "War is the works of man. War is the destruction of human life. War is death." This Pope, who encouraged his audience to be mindful of the tremendous human misery in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, firmly believed that the feeling of amazement that we experience at the eminence of the human dignity that lies before us, is Christianity's prime contribution to the contemporary world. In his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* he emphasized this by saying, "In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man's worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity. This amazement determines the Church's mission in the world and, perhaps even more so, 'in the modern world'" (#10).

3 The seven propositions of Christian Humanism

■ 1. Existence in itself is good.

Now, after having dealt with the history of Christian Humanism in general, I wish to clarify its content in the form of seven propositions, in accordance with the Bible and the Second Vatican Council.

The first proposition in Christian Humanism is to underscore the fact that existence in itself is good. Existing and living as a human being has meaning and value. Accordingly, to live, grow, and advance in an ever more fruitful manner, is also good. Existence and life are not to be denied or destroyed, but to be affirmed

and nurtured. In Christianity, this type of existence-affirming thinking is rooted in the faith that the world was created through the love of God. In the Old Testament's *Book of Wisdom* we have the following passage that expresses this idea beautifully.

Yes, you love everything that exists,
and nothing that you have made disgusts you,
since, if you had hated something, you would not have made it.
And how could a thing subsist, had you not willed it?
Or how be it preserved, if not called forth by you?
No, you spare all, since all is yours, Lord, lover of life! (11:24-26)

The conviction that the love of the Eternal and Omnipotent God includes all, and especially all human kind, is the ultimate source and support of a Humanism that does not exclude anyone.

■ 2. Human being is the image of God

The second proposition of Christian Humanism is the idea that human beings are created in the image of God. The fact that a human being is an image of God implies that everyone of us has a purpose, and that none should be exploited or imposed upon. The dignity of being an image of God is something imbued in all humans. Everyone should be shown respect and none should be treated shabbily, regardless of issues such as nationality, race, gender, class, financial means, learning, or health.

As images of God all human beings are basically equal. Certainly, as regards talent, bodily health, intelligence, lineage, and so on, people differ from each other. Yet, by virtue of the fact that we exist as human beings, we are all equal and we are endowed with the same human rights.

Based on such thinking, Christian Humanism demands that efforts be made to

see that excessive disparity in wealth and excessive inequality with regard to power do not exist. Hence, in nations where landlords control major portions of the land, the Second Vatican Council strongly recommends the carrying out of land reform, whereby the destitute sections of the population may be able to have their own land. As a political system the Council extols democracy as most suitable for modern society, since it permits the participation of all. The Church has already relinquished all desire to acquire special power from the state. However, what it did demand was the recognition of perfect religious freedom for all people. That is to say, a person's arrival at the truth should not be the result of compulsion, but of a quest conducted in total freedom.

The conviction that all human beings are endowed with inviolable rights, has its source in the fact that God, the Absolute, has enabled us to exist as persons destined to eternal life. The existence of a human being has to be viewed as an end in itself. To kill or confine others on the pretext of doing it for God's glory is not acceptable. It is the human being fully alive who is the glory of God (Irenaeus). In other words, the absolute value of human dignity is based on the absoluteness of God.

■ 3. An all-round human formation

The third proposition of Christian Humanism is the insistence on an all-round human formation. We humans, like other creatures, lead a life bound by time, and steadily build ourselves in time. The human person is born as a creature with ample possibilities, and needs through education, learning, training and so on to develop them. By conceding the value of existence and concurring in the belief that living fruitfully is something good, Christian Humanism proclaims the need for a lifelong development.

Regarding human formation, Christian Humanism lays special stress on the harmonious expansion of every human aspect. Each one of us is endowed with reason, will, feeling, and a body, and it is crucial that we develop them all. As re-

gards reason, we need to gain necessary knowledge, we need a grasp of the values that have been evolved by the culture of our nation and of all human communities, we need a keen sense of judgment, and we need to develop a creative intelligence. Regarding the will, we need to acquire virtues, and build up a natural aptitude to select and carry out what is right. Regarding feeling, we need a keen sensitivity, and we need to build up in ourselves the talent needed to evaluate and create beauty. As regards our bodies, we need to forge them into shape through physical training. Ultimately it is by our contact with the world of truth, goodness, and beauty that we grow into human persons. Through contact with truth we acquire a sense of right discrimination, and gain a talent for rational thinking. Through contact with goodness we acquire virtues and perform good works spontaneously and in a mood of joy, regardless of whether these works are seen by others or not. Through contact with beauty we get freedom from our world of concerns, and taste the joy of indifference to worldly goods.

Additionally, regarding human formation, we need to focus upon the most profound human dimension, namely the religious dimension that is linked to what is ultimate. A great gift of human persons is the fact that they can probe the meaning of existence. Hence, to develop all other aspects of human nature and yet leave this most pivotal aspect in an undeveloped state would be a distortion.

The Second Vatican Council declares as follows:

When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise—human dignity, brotherly communion, and freedom—according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace. (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #39)

This declaration based on Christian faith affirms the eternal value of human formation.

■ 4. Jesus, who reveals human existence to all people

An attribute of Christian Humanism is the fact that Christ occupies the central position in it. First, when we gaze upon the figure of Jesus, we get a clear insight into the way of life of a human being who lived as an image of God. The Jesus who lived and died for others, who accepted all good and evil and who forgave all, who loved God the Father and incessantly obeyed His will, who accepted everything from God in an attitude of trust and entrusted his life wholly to God, attained the apex of love by dying on the cross, and lives in the bosom of God as a human being who has overcome death by his resurrection. He is the only human being who realized to perfection what it is for a human being to be an image of God, and hence, by imitating him, we follow the ideal path towards becoming authentic human beings, that is, human beings who are images of God.

Second, according to Christianity, Jesus, the Son of God made human enabled human kind through union with himself to "share in God's divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Irenaeus would say, "The Son of God, owing to his excessive love, became the Son of man. The purpose was to convert mankind into children of God." Among the Greek theologians, there are some who put it a little more boldly and say, "God became a human being and the purpose of this was to convert the human beings into God." Herein lies the greatest blessing, freely granted to us by the living God. Thus, through faith, accompanied by the practice of love, it has become possible for human beings to partake in the very life of God.

This is indeed a blessing and hope for Christians, but according to the Second Vatican Council, it is not something for Christian believers alone. The council says: The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery, that is, in Christ's salvific death and resurrection (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #22). This

"way known to God" may be explained as leading the kind of life wherein we follow our conscience. Regarding conscience, the Council has the following statement.

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself, but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one's neighbor. (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #16)

In the present state of God's salvation history, we may consider the voice of conscience as the working of the Holy Spirit granted to mankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through its workings, those who entrust everything to the all-merciful God and lead the kind of life wherein love is shown to all, may be said to already share in the life of God, even if they have no awareness of it.

Of course, on considering this as Christians, we think it most desirable that all human beings should be aware of this truth, accept with faith the love of God revealed to us through Jesus Christ, and join the community of believers giving thanks to God.

■ 5. Laying down the "Old Man" in us

The prospect of mankind becoming an image of God depends on God's love and blessing, and yet human cooperation is also needed. This is the fifth proposition of Christian Humanism. As stated in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, "As

God's dear children, then, take him as your pattern and follow Christ by loving as he loved you" (Ephesians 5:1). These words convey accurately the task given to us by the love of God.

Realizing an issue such as this requires effort. To quote the words of Scripture, we need effort to fight the "Old Man" who lies concealed within us all. Human beings tend to live selfishly and have an urge to satisfy their egoistic passions. They are often tempted by greed for wealth, power, or pleasure, or conversely, they are urged to submit to the demands of idleness or lethargy. To be ruled by covetousness and to live in idleness are both traits of the "Old Man", and in order to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we need, as scripture says, to "kill" this "Old Man".

Of course, what we "kill" here is not something of real value. It is the immaturity in a person, who is, so to say, not fully grown. In order to become truly human, we have to prefer "being" to "possessing." For this we need self-denial, self-control, and patience, and more than anything else, we need to have the confidence that God loves us for what we are. In most cases, the reason why some are keen on gratifying their passions and others are devoid of any desire to do anything at all, is the fact that they suffer from anxiety. The only thing that will liberate us from this anxiety is the realization that God accepts us.

■ 6. To live for others

We humans do not live in isolation. We live with God and other people, and by loving, accepting, and showing an attitude of openness to God and others, we develop into genuine human beings. On this issue, *Gaudium et Spes, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* that was issued by the Second Vatican Council, has the following statement.

...The fundamental law of human perfection and consequently of the transformation of the world is the new commandment of love. (#38)

Today there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every man, no matter who he is, and, if we meet him, to come to his aid in a positive way... (#27)

...Man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself. (#24)

To engage in dialogue with others, to do good to others, and to love one another as Jesus loved us, are what it means to lead a life as an image of God. For, as it is stated in the Bible, "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

We humans need to engage in dialogue not just with other human beings but also with the nature that surrounds us. We humans need to foster life and respect all living beings as radiating the brilliance of God, who is the Lover of life. More than what is stated in *Genesis* 1:28, namely, "subdue the earth," it is what is stated in *Genesis* 2:15, namely, "God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it," that exemplifies the task given to mankind by God. In other words, with nature, mankind is the gardener. Nature is not to be destroyed. Rather, it is to be tended and turned into a lovely garden, an apt dwelling place for humanity.

■ 7. God surpasses everything

These six propositions I have presented so far, may be appropriate for the type of Humanism where the values of mankind constitute the core. This seventh proposition of Christian Humanism, however, may seem a little odd, since it includes the following requisite. Since the infinite God transcends everything else to an endless degree, in order to safeguard our fidelity towards God we should be ready to forego everything else. According to our Christian faith, even despite our having lost all earthly goods, we suffer no loss whatsoever if we still have God. This conviction was most faithfully realized by martyrs of every age. Those who

lost their lives in trying to save another from drowning, or those who sought to rescue someone who had fallen from the platform onto the railway tracks, also displayed this same type of fervor. These words of Jesus, namely, "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it but anyone who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35), may be applied to such people.

If we were to interpret these words a little more broadly, we may perhaps say that anyone who loses one's own life for the sake of love will save it. This may sound like a paradox. Yet, only a person who has no regrets at all about losing his/her life in order to save a loved one has a definite reason for living in happiness, and conversely, a person who uses Humanism as a pretext for self-defense or self-exhilaration may be said to have lost all genuine humanity.

God transcends all. God loves all living beings and desires that all be saved, and only a person who lives a life conjoined with God's love may be said to live a life of Christian Humanism.

Thinking deeply

■ "The Solidarity of Mankind—An Appeal to the World Conscience"

Science cannot tell us what is the ultimate meaning of man's life and world history. Questions of values do not enter into the scientific process; science often excludes such questions. Therefore, we must be ever alert to ask: What is the ultimate value of what we do? To discover this ultimate meaning we can rely only on that truth which surpasses human knowledge, that is, the truth of faith. This faith is not just an unfounded, empty sense of confidence, but an encounter with Truth itself.

What we need are values which span the centuries and are not bound to the contemporary spirit of the times. With this wisdom we must control and harmonize *science, technology, and power* with moral and spiritual values so that they do not make a wasteland of our planet, turn us into robots, and ensnare us in mistaken social policies.

Cardinal Josef Höffner, Archbishop of Cologne, 28 March 1973
(Professor Emeritus of Sophia University)

■ Speech at an Anniversary Party

We are all bound together by three fundamental realities. First, our nationality and the color of our skin is different, but we all share *the same human nature*, and so we cannot be divided or limited by family, tribe, race, or social status. Secondly, through our common humanity, we are all attracted to *the same fundamental spiritual and moral values*: the good, the true, the beautiful, and the sacred. Although each culture expresses these values in different ways, a radical pluralism that makes such differences irreconcilable would make our unity impossible. Thirdly, we also share *the same inalienable human rights*, such as the right to life, to bodily well being, to freedom, and to security. To assure these rights to all, a community based on law and the solidarity of the human race are necessary.

Cardinal Josef Höffner, Archbishop of Cologne, 2 November 1979

※本書は、第9刷で暁道学長の巻頭言と、
李中等教育担当理事の第V章を追加しました。

叡智を生きる

—他者のために、他者とともに

2010年8月21日	第1版第1刷発行
2011年3月24日	第2刷発行
2011年5月20日	第3刷発行
2012年3月30日	第4刷発行
2013年3月27日	第5刷発行
2014年3月28日	第6刷発行
2015年3月25日	第7刷発行
2016年3月25日	第8刷発行
2017年3月25日	第9刷発行
2018年4月1日	第10刷発行

編者：上智大学『叡智を生きる』刊行委員会

発行者：佐久間 勤

発行：Sophia University Press

上智大学出版

〒102-8554 東京都千代田区紀尾井町7-1

URL：<http://www.sophia.ac.jp/>

制作・発売（株きょうせい）

〒136-8575 東京都江東区新木場1-18-11

TEL 03-6892-6666 FAX 03-6892-6925

フリーコール 0120-953-431

〈検印省略〉 URL：<https://gyosei.jp>

©Ed. The Publication Committee of "An Unending

Quest", Sophia University, 2010 Printed in Japan

印刷・製本 ぎょうせいデジタル㈱

ISBN978-4-324-09050-3

(5300144-00-000)

[略号：(上智) 叡智を生きる]

NDC 分類377.28

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