

Niwano Peace Foundation
Response to a Lecture by Prof. David Carrasco,
Harvard Divinity School
*The Bridges of Meaning and Friendship:
“A New Humanism” from Mircea Eliade to Michio Araki*
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Examples of a New Humanism?
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Introduction

I feel very honoured to have been asked to respond to Prof. Carrasco today. I would also like to thank the Niwano Peace Foundation for supporting both the publication of the book 『宗教と宗教学のあいだ』 (*Between Religion and the Study of Religion*) and today's event. Rather than directly responding to Prof. Carrasco's talk, I will try to offer a few concrete examples related to the themes he discussed.

Many of these themes derive from the work of Charles H. Long: cultural contact, the importance of religious symbols and images, a new humanism, and the possibility of creating new, more meaningful communities. The first issue of the journal *History of Religions* in 1961 contained an essay by Mircea Eliade entitled “History of Religions and A New Humanism.”¹ “Humanism” usually refers to Renaissance Humanism. This was basically a form of Christian Humanism that rediscovered the lost culture and thought of Greece and Rome and believed that there was much to be learned from these forgotten, lost, and somewhat alien cultures.

Eliade envisioned the possibility of learning not just from Greece and Rome but also from the entire history of human thought, culture, and religion. In some sense I think, Eliade wanted to relive, re-experience, and learn from the whole of human religious history.

Has a new humanism emerged? In some ways, I think, Eliade's essay might be read as an accurate prophecy. The last fifty years have witnessed, I think, an increase in dialogue, conversation, and interaction among scholars, artists, people from various religions, and others. In his essay, Eliade wrote that: “It is hard to believe that experiences as ‘foreign’ as those of a Paleolithic hunter or a Buddhist monk will have no effect whatever on modern cultural life.”² 1961 was a time when the experiences and outlook of Buddhist monks were not widely known or influential in the West.

This is, of course, no longer the case. One need only think of the Dalai Lama.

The terms “humanism” and “a new humanism” have many meanings and are not easy to define. Today I will focus on one aspect of humanism. This is the idea that we have much to learn from other cultures and religions. The encounter of cultures and religions should thus be a process of reciprocal learning.

As the work of Charles Long has shown, the possibility of creating new, more meaningful forms of human community entails getting beyond oppositions such as us/them, primitive/civilized, developed/undeveloped, Buddhist/Christian, and Japanese/non-Japanese. There is, of course, a nearly endless list of oppositions here. Commenting on Long’s writings, Prof. Carrasco has suggested that if we can free ourselves from such oppositions, “we will be touched and gain insight and a new conception of human community may emerge.”³

The activities of the Niwano Peace Foundation might be cited as an example of a new humanism at work. The Niwano Peace Prize is awarded to leaders from various religious and cultural traditions. This is an example of one religious community recognizing that there is much to be learned from other religions.

Asian Rural Institute

In *Between Religion and the Study of Religion*, I wrote an essay describing the career of Takami Toshihiro, one of the founders of Asian Rural Institute (ARI), as an example of a new humanism.⁴ Born in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Takami experienced Japanese colonialism and the war period at first hand. Following the war, Takami converted to Christianity, studied abroad in the United States, and became an ordained minister. At Tsurukawa Gakuin in Tokyo, Takami became involved in teaching agricultural skills to students from South East Asia. Partially inspired by their experience of participating in a multi-religious relief effort in Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1972, Takami and several of his colleagues established ARI in 1973.

The aim of the school is not just to teach agricultural and leadership skills to grass roots leaders throughout the world but also to create a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious community where all can learn from another through dialogue and living together. The aim of ARI, in other words, is to create a situation of cultural and religious contact in which new forms and visions of community might emerge.

Takami and ARI’s vision is built on a number of basic images or symbols: living

together with the earth, sharing, and food. Based on these images, Takami points to a level of religious experience underlying all religions and that can unite all people.

Religious experience is nothing special. In living together, one's self and the surroundings go on changing together. The experience of this is a religious, spiritual experience. In other words, people sharing life together is religious.⁵

Takami also suggests that this religious experience has its own form of communion.

Because students at ARI come from different countries and cultures, communication is very difficult. Food is the thing that allows them to overcome barriers making communication difficult. Through producing and sharing their own food, everyone finally becomes one community (common body⁶).

One of the purposes of ARI, was to help people throughout the world become self-sufficient in food, to have enough to eat. We should recall, however, that about 16% of Japanese do not have enough to eat. The work of volunteers from Japan in Bangladesh in 1972 gave rise to the first NGO in Japan. Many NGOs have since arisen in Japan to help people both in Japan and throughout the world. One of the more recent NGOs is Second Harvest Japan founded in 2000. Its purpose is to supply those in need in Japan with food. Please support your local food bank.

The Chartres Labyrinth

At the beginning of the 13th century, a labyrinth was installed in the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France. The labyrinth is not a maze; it is a one-way path. In Christian terms, walking the labyrinth to the center represents a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a journey closer to God. In the 1990s, the labyrinth was "rediscovered" by an Episcopalian minister, Lauren Artress. Artress introduced the labyrinth to the United States.

Many people who walk the labyrinth, however, are not Christian. Many would describe themselves as non-religious or spiritual. They seem to be attracted to the labyrinth because it is a concrete symbol or image of the idea that life is a journey. This seems to be a basic image or symbol that many people find attractive. Walking the labyrinth can also be understood as a form of walking meditation or mindfulness.

Labyrinths can now be found not only at churches but also at hospitals, colleges, and parks in the United States and throughout the world. Walking the labyrinth is

also frequently used as a form of inter-faith religious practice. Labyrinth walks often involve people of various religions, people who consider themselves spiritual, and people who consider themselves as non-religious. The labyrinth is thus a concrete symbol that has brought people together in new forms of community: Christians, those of other religions, and those with no religion.

The rediscovery of the labyrinth thus might be related to the notion of a new humanism in two ways. It represents, first of all, learning from the distant culture of medieval Christianity. Secondly, it has proved meaningful not just to Christians but also to those of other religions and those with no religion.

In Japan, labyrinth walks have been held at Christian International University, Sophia University, Tokyo Union Church, Asian Rural Institute, and other places. Last month the first labyrinth walk at a Buddhist temple was held at Meguro Fudosen in Tokyo.

Here I would simply like to share the responses of two people who walked the labyrinth in Japan. This will illustrate how concrete images and symbols have the power to work transformations in people's lives.

The first is by a woman in her 80s who walked the labyrinth at a church in Kumamoto six months after the Kumamoto earthquake.

This was the first time I had entered a church since my school days. As soon as I entered the church, I recalled praying every morning at school. My legs have been bothering me recently so I waited before everyone else had finished walking before entering the labyrinth. At first I felt very unsteady walking but then I got the hang of it. My legs did not hurt me at all. I also felt secure because the leader of the session was peacefully walking in a circle around the outer edge of the labyrinth. When I reached the center, I naturally let out a deep breath. I have lived a life where I faced many difficulties, from my childhood to the present. But I now see my life has been a good one!

By re-discovering, in her experiences in her teenage years, the base of the path she had walked in life, she was able to feel "my life has been a good one." According to her family, this was the first time they had heard her speak this way. And afterwards she started speaking of many of her school day experiences they had never heard before. Even after several months, she would often say, "It was because I often prayed during my school days that I was able to lead such a good life."

One more woman who walked had studied at Sophia's Grief Care Course. She described her experience as follows. I quote her response at length because it is more moving and eloquent than anything I might say.

'Will I be able to discover something by walking the labyrinth?' That was my honest feeling when I first saw the labyrinth. I started slowly walking. I was told to walk at my own pace but I did not know what my own pace was. I walked paying attention to the pace of those walking around me. Don't walk too fast and don't walk too slowly I told myself. I tried to match the pace of others.

I thought it would be good if I just followed the white path and did not cause any trouble for those walking with me. I just tried to walk without thinking unnecessarily. But I soon began to worry. 'Am I walking on the right path?' I suddenly began to fear that I would make a mistake and not reach the center.

I looked back but it was difficult to tell if I was on the right path. I began to think 'What if I make a mistake?' The speed of my walking became very slow. I walked slowly step-by-step trying carefully to follow the path I was on. I walked slowly on gripped by the fear I would not reach the goal.

In the middle of the walk, I felt like the light of the candle I was passing by was comforting me. But I couldn't just stay by the candle. I had to move on. I couldn't understand why I felt so anxious when I was only walking.

While I was thinking thoughts such as this, I finally reached the center. I suddenly realized 'That's it!' I realized that my husband dying five years ago was the start of my walking the labyrinth. My thinking and feelings while walking the labyrinth overlapped with my feelings after I lost my husband.

I wondered whether I was walking the right path after losing my husband. I did not understand how I could go on living and taking care of my young children. The path before me was dark. It was painful to live. Just breathing was painful. Many good friends supported me but I couldn't go on just relying on them.

When I was standing in the center, I felt 'This is where I am now!' Even while feeling anxious and relying on the support of others, I have

been able to find the meaning of going on living. My heart was filled with the feeling that: 'I am OK. I am OK. I have been walking the right path!'

I was able to return from the center without looking carefully where my feet were going. My future felt bright to the extent I didn't think I needed the light of the candle anymore. I felt: 'My life is OK.' When I reached the center, my heart was filled with joy. I felt like I may be able to feel this way even when, one day, I meet the end of my life.

These two accounts of walking the labyrinth, I think, speak for themselves. I would only add that both people quite naturally made use of the metaphor or image that "life is a journey."

Spiritual Care and Applied Religious Studies

I think we can also relate the notion of a new humanism to the growing interest in Spiritual Care and Applied Religious Studies in Japan.

Religion in Japan has been in a bit of a crisis since at least the end of the Pacific War. Following Japan's defeat, many in Japan lost trust in established religions. More recently there seems to be a decline in membership in many traditional religious groups as well as some of the new religions. Shimazono Susumu has also argued that the Great East Japan Earthquake revealed a spiritual crisis in Japan.

While many Japanese are suspicious of religion, many also seem to be searching for something that is religious or spiritual. Many would prefer to use the term "spiritual" rather than "religion." People are searching for something that is "in between" (あいだ) the duality or opposition of religion and secularism.

In 2007, the Japan Society of Spiritual Care (スピリチュアル ケア学会) was founded. The Society of Spiritual Care seems to have been founded based on the recognition that there was a demand for some form of spiritual care for the ill and the bereaved that was not being met by either psychologists or religious leaders. In other words, people were searching for something that was not being supplied by the opposed alternatives of secularism and religion.

In 2012, Tohoku University offered a program in Applied Religious Studies (実践宗教学). The purpose of the program was to train religious leaders as "chaplains" (臨床宗師、チャプレン) to provide spiritual care to all those in need.

Such leaders were trained through discussions with people from different religions as well as those with no religion. This is another example of various religions in Japan joining together, talking to each other, and forming a new community in order to help others.

In 2011, there was the great earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku. There were obviously many people in need of spiritual care. But there were not enough priests and ministers. And many people were not members of a religion. The following questions arose. How does a Zen priest, for instance, provide spiritual care to a member of another school of Buddhism? How does a Christian minister provide spiritual care to someone with no religion?

These responses to the religious or spiritual crisis in Japan might be seen as a form of a new humanism. These responses require members of different religions to actually talk with each other and cooperate. They also require that religious leaders and non-religious professionals such as doctors, psychologists, and nurses talk together and learn from each other.

Concluding Remarks

A little while ago I spoke about the labyrinth. We are all walking the labyrinth of life together step by step. All of us who have gathered here today to share this time and space are in the midst of our various life journeys. Our paths may cross again. I trust your journey will be a peaceful and meaningful one. Though we will part today and go our own ways, please do not forget that we are all on the same path or journey together.

Thank you for your kind attention.

¹ Mircea Eliade, "History of Religions and a New Humanism," *History of Religions* 1 (1961): 1-8. An expanded version was later published as Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism," in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 1-11.

² Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism," p. 4.

³ David Carrasco, "Proem," in Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 1986), p. xvii.

⁴ This essay has subsequently been published in English as Richard A. Gardner, "Living Together with the Earth," *Euodoô: Journal of Rural Future Study* 1 (2017): 24-46.

⁵ Takami Toshihiro, *Tsuchi to tomo ni ikiru: Ajia gakuin to watashi* [Living Together with the Earth: My Experiences at Asian Rural Institute] (Tokyo: Nihon kirisutokyô shuppankyoku, 1996), p. 28.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 114-5.