

# Preface

This book presents a selection of writings on humanism from the perspective of Christian faith. Beginning with Plato, Aristotle, and the Old Testament, as forerunners of the Christian tradition of humanism, the readings range from early Christianity to modern times. Included are such important thinkers as Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Petrarch, Erasmus, Galileo, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Sayers, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Excerpts from the works of such influential persons show how Christians in different historical periods have addressed themselves to significant human problems.

The purpose of the book is to bring into plain view the enduring strength and amplitude of the humanism found in historic Christianity. The selections are not intended to trace the development of Christian doctrine, nor to review the history of the church, but rather to unfold before the reader the main elements in the tradition of Christian humanism. Of each contribution the reader is invited to ask, "What does this writer say about the meaning of being human?" A related question is, "How does the writer's Christian faith affect the understanding of humanism?"

As used in this book, the term "Christian humanism" refers to a long-standing feature, especially of Western civilization, in which Christian insight and practice have yielded certain basic understandings about human nature, its powers, limits, purpose, and destiny. Christian humanism has been a fluid rather than a fixed element in Western culture. It embraces disagreements among Christians regarding various human actions and aspirations. Sometimes it must take issue with other types of humanism, but at other times it may join non-Christians in supporting goals for the protection and enhancement of human life. In its fundamental attitudes, Christian humanism is moved by a profound appreciation of the distinctiveness of human existence and a desire to enable all human persons to attain their fulfillment, as individuals and in community with others.

Christian humanism bases its regard for human beings on the cen-

tral affirmations of the Christian faith. Persons owe their existence and true nature to the action of a Creator God. History reveals a universal and persistent tendency on the part of humankind to rebel against the Creator, with disastrous consequences for human society and the world. But God in his love for his creatures has acted to restore human beings and their environment. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world, so Christians believe, is not only God's move to rescue humans from their fallenness, but is the ultimate affirmation of the human race and the personal pledge of its fulfillment.

This particular way of looking at human existence is not merely a page from a Christian catechism; it is the source of much of the substance and energy of the Western humanistic tradition. Christian humanism is as much a part of the cultural background of every person touched by Western culture as are, for example, the development of modern science and the ideal of democracy, both of which were nourished on Christian soil.

In past generations, educated people, whether committed Christians or not, usually had a general familiarity with the tradition of Christian humanism. In recent times, however, knowledge of Christian humanism has grown faint, in the institutions of higher learning and even in the churches. The conviction guiding the preparation of this book is that younger and older adults are entitled to know about this profound and fascinating humanism, an outgrowth of historic religion and a vital part of their intellectual and moral heritage.

The present volume has grown out of a joint academic program partially supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Four colleges of the Upper Midwest, two Roman Catholic and two Lutheran, have collaborated in introducing students and the wider public to the heritage of Christian humanism. The four colleges—the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota; Luther College in Decorah, Iowa; St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota; and St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota—are all liberal-arts institutions devoted to the study of the humanities and consciously related to the Christian community. The grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities have enabled these colleges to introduce new courses on Christian humanism on the respective campuses, to present a series of public festivals and seminars, and to make study materials on Christian humanism available to other colleges, universities, and adult discussion groups through publication.

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