

In Memoriam

ALFRED EDWARDS EMERSON

December 31, 1896–October 3, 1976

One of the world's pioneer sociobiologists, Alfred Edwards Emerson was invited to participate in the primal 1954 conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science because a conference planner had seen his now classic paper, "Dynamic Homeostasis: A Unifying Principle in Organic, Social, and Ethical Evolution," in the February 1954 *Scientific Monthly*. From that time until a few weeks before his passing he was an intellectual and spiritual pillar of IRAS, the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science, and the editorial advisory board of *Zygon*. He was one of those great men whose keen, well-informed, and venturesome yet careful mind and whose quiet, humble, yet alert, creative, and helpful spirit continually generated wisdom and courage among those privileged to be with him.

His persistent and patient collection of a million specimens of most of the nearly two thousand known termite species from all over the world (now in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City) and his detailed examination and analysis of termite nature and behavior may not seem to some to be a likely route to a clarification of some of the greatest problems of religion, but a careful examination of his papers in *Zygon*, and papers by others which he stimulated, will provide a key to some of the prime factors in the evolution of social and ethical behavior under the guidance of the progressive, homeostatic dynamics inherent in the development of ecosystems.

Like Theodosius Dobzhansky, he recognized the psychological roots of religion in the awareness of death and the consequent problems of meaning and purpose. One of his papers in *Zygon* reflects some of his scientifically grounded confirmation of the traditionally evolved religious understandings of death as a passage to further and better life. Another reflects the biological grounding of human purpose. But, more than most, Emerson also understood the societal roots and ethical functions of religion, grounded in the realities of man's biologically evolved nature and the selection processes and pressures operating in man's conjoined biological and sociocultural evolution. His "Dynamic Homeostasis" (reprinted in the June 1968 *Zygon*), suggesting dynamic stability as the unifying principle governing organic, social, and ethical evolution, still remains a sound cross-fertilizer for theological reflection to generate theological interpretations that are enriched by scientific understanding.