

THE HERITAGE OF RALPH WENDELL BURHOE FOR  
THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY:  
A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

by *Hubert Meisinger*

*Abstract.* This paper begins with some reflections on my personal experiences with Ralph Wendell Burhoe during visits to the Chicago Center for Religion and Science. I learned to know Burhoe as an interested and kind person with enormous intellectual power. In this paper I argue that integration of different concepts was the chief focus of his thinking, expressing both an ethical and a dogmatic concern. If his theory of altruism contributes to the scientific investigations into the problem of trans-kin altruism, then his vision of a scientific theology gains credibility. Such an integration is made plausible through the interpretation of altruism in light of Christian love. In fact, Burhoe's neonaturalistic approach may be a fertile resource for the dialogue between science and theology in Germany, and serve as an exemplar of Burhoe's important impact on this dialogue in general.

*Keywords:* altruism; Ralph Wendell Burhoe; Christian love; Philip Hefner; integration; neonaturalism; *one world*.

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It is about eight years now since I met Ralph Wendell Burhoe for the first time, in March 1990. I had come to Chicago because the dialogue between science and theology had interested me since my school days. During my study at the University of Heidelberg I had attended several seminars dealing with the science and theology discussion in Germany. I hoped to learn more about this dialogue in the United States. I had heard about the Chicago Center for Religion and Science, which focuses on this dialogue, and so I planned a two-month visit to Chicago. On the day I arrived, Tom Gilbert, the associate director of the center, took me to a meeting of the Chicago Group, a religion-and-science professional group that Burhoe convened. I remember that Philip Hefner was there and some other people—and of course Ralph Burhoe. Though we did not

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have much time to talk with each other that evening, my first impression was that of a very kind person. During my visit I met Burhoe several more times, and we had long conversations with each other, on science, theology, his experiences during his life, and my vision for my own life. He listened carefully to every question I asked, gave responses that showed his enormous intellectual power and kind nature, and asked questions himself. Meanwhile, on a table next to us, a tape recorder preserved our conversation. It seemed important to him to record what we said so that he could prepare for further conversations—and as I later learned, he saw the recorded conversation as a kind of manifestation of a culture type which should not be lost to the next generation. Here we had a young German student, planning to prepare a paper on Burhoe for his exam in Germany (cf. Meisinger 1995) and an elder American theologian, or should I say scientist? Burhoe was both at once. I felt that from the first moment he talked about science and theology. And I understood it intellectually when I worked on his concept of a scientific theology.

Coming from a Lutheran background, I found that conversations with Burhoe meant entering a new dimension of thinking. As a Unitarian, he had other presuppositions in looking at God and the world than I had at the time and in some respects still hold today. However, he did stress that Jesus Christ was a crucial figure for him, too. Without committing a *sacrificium intellectus*, he integrated Jesus Christ into his vision during one of our conversations: He saw Jesus Christ as the one who imposed the love command on those who were and still are his disciples.

To my mind this conversation about the role of Jesus Christ within Christian religion points to the main interest and two central concerns of Burhoe's thinking: Over the course of a lifetime the integration of different concepts was important for his intellectual development, thinking, and writing. Primarily, he tried to integrate scientific and theological knowledge and wisdom in his development of a scientific theology. One could call this his *dogmatic concern*. In addition, this example shows what I would call his *ethical concern*. In his theory of altruism Burhoe asserted that religions are the value-transmitting cores of cultures. They enable altruism to extend beyond genetic kin to include members of the larger group—a practice he called trans-kin altruism.

The two concerns are related. If Burhoe's theory of altruism, wherein religion plays an important role, really contributes to the scientific investigations into the problem of trans-kin altruism, then his vision of a scientific theology gains credibility: In this instance, scientific and theological thinking have such a tight connection that they enrich each other reciprocally.

This thought requires more detailed investigation in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which Burhoe was deeply rooted. The

central question is whether it is possible to relate altruism with Christian love or even to regard them as identical. The theologian Anders Nygren, for example, whose background was of course not in sociobiology, sees this identification as disastrous, although he does acknowledge certain surface similarities between altruism and Christian neighborly love (Nygren 1953, 95). Actually, to relate altruism to Christian love is not commonly accepted at all (cf. Hillerdal 1978, 349).

However, to my mind it can be shown that altruism plays a central role within Christian religion and theology (cf. Meisinger 1995, 1996). It corresponds to basic aspects of the Christian love command (cf. Mark 12: 28–34) and to texts which have to do with helping other people (cf. Luke 10:25–37). A basic motive can be found in the Johannine literature, where love is defined as giving one's life for one's friends (John 15:13). The most impressive, and probably the most intensely demanding, command is that one is to love even one's enemies (cf. Matt 5:44). Here, the boundaries of genetic kinship are surely transgressed and human freedom is put to the test. Thus, in my opinion, it seems plausible that a relationship exists: Whereas sociobiology claims to investigate the phenomenon of altruism scientifically from outside, the New Testament prescientifically describes altruistic behavior from the inner perspectives of various groups. This thesis is in accord with Philip Hefner's perspective on altruism and Christian love. In an important statement Hefner says that "from the first moment that I read Wilson, I felt that a religious tradition that centers on a man dying on a cross for the benefit of the whole world could not responsibly ignore a scientific discussion about the emergence within the evolutionary process of the possibility of living viably so as to put the welfare of others so high on the agenda that one creature would put its own welfare in jeopardy for the sake of others" (Hefner 1993, 191). And he concludes, the "concepts of altruism as articulated by the evolutionary biocultural sciences and the love command of the Hebrew-Christian tradition focus upon the same phenomenon: beneficent human behavior toward others, even those who are not genetic kin" (Hefner 1993, 197). In contrast to Nygren—and in a way also enhancing Nygren—Hefner finds it theologically necessary to identify altruism and Christian love in order to "distinguish sharply the tendency to make of altruism a self-seeking strategy for attaining other goods. . . . The Christian love command can be identified with the behavior associated with the biocultural evolutionary concept of altruism, but the meaning and status of altruism are not exhausted by those scientific concepts" (Hefner 1993, 208f.). To my mind, the best illustration of Hefner's view concerns the command to love even one's enemies, which requires a special kind of trans-kin altruism that cannot be fully explained on the basis of scientific concepts. The ground of such love is God, the "way things really are" as

Hefner puts it. Thus, altruism has an intrinsic, ontic character, rooted in the fundamental character of reality (cf. Hefner 1993, 207–9).

Because altruism as seen in Christian love plays an important part within Christian religion, Burhoe's theory on altruism can be integrated within, and fits with, a Christian concept of love. Altruistic behavior seems to be adapted to the "central reality" (Theissen 1985). That could mean that this reality not only permits love but cannot be without love itself.

Thus the integration of the Christian idea of love into a scientific investigation of altruism may enhance this investigation in its understandings of trans-kin altruism and even the love of enemies. Burhoe's vision of a scientific theology gains credibility because it appears that a concrete religion interpreted functionally may help to describe altruism investigated from a scientific point of view.

Burhoe was convinced not only that religion is important for the emergence of trans-kin altruism within human history but also that religion is important for the survival of humankind today because of its well-winnowed wisdom. In addition, he held the view that the sciences are new revelations of reality. From these convictions Burhoe worked to construct a scientific theology that might be seen as a Rosetta stone for theology and science. Apparently, the resulting concepts may not only replace older theological ones but should have the inherent power to replace scientific concepts as well. Burhoe's primary intention was to enhance the credibility of theology by relating its concepts to those of science. Secondly, he hoped to broaden the framework of the sciences by integrating religious and theological concepts into their inquiry, which can now be related to the "central reality." This mutual relation integrates extreme models of the relationship between science and theology that place either science or theology at the top of a hierarchical construction. By interpreting science as a new revelation of the truth, Burhoe wanted to restore theology as the queen of the sciences (Burhoe 1981, 34). To my mind, this points to the key fact that both extreme models in their one-sidedness have to be avoided in order to continue the highly developed current dialogue between science and theology.

Of special interest to the dialogue between science and theology in Germany is the fact that Burhoe represented a neonaturalistic theology (cf. Mortensen 1995, 215). This neonaturalism is much more influential in the United States than in Germany or anywhere else in Europe. It may, however, be seen as a solution for the faith-knowledge problem that is acceptable to modern consciousness because it avoids the extremes of creationism and scientism. In Germany, naturalism is only beginning to be discussed—let alone accepted—because Karl Barth's dialectic theology still underlies theological thinking in many respects. The most elaborated

project that seeks to integrate naturalistic perspectives was developed by Gerd Theissen (1985). He worked out an evolutionary approach to biblical faith that enables one to see the concepts and the content of the biblical faith in a new light. However, only a few theologians have taken notice of his ideas, and most of them react critically (cf. Lüke 1990). Within the scientific community, Theissen is even more unknown, and scientists tend to reject arguments that derive from a naturalistic theology. One may ask, if a view is not widely accepted within theology, why should it be interesting for scientists? In addition, many of these scientists grew up within a Christian culture that traditionally rejects natural theology.

One of the important criticisms is that a naturalistic approach precludes belief in a personal God. As far as Burhoe was concerned, "such personhood may not be necessary," because in many religions the "ultimate power is not anthropomorphically conceived" (Burhoe 1981, 123). He even saw support for deanthropomorphization in the Old Testament and in the Christian tradition itself when the three persons of the Trinity are not identified as self-conscious beings. In contrast, the personhood of the three persons is in fact a necessary element within much of Christian tradition. For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg even connects this personhood with the personhood of human beings:

The persons are referred to the other persons. They achieve their selfhood ecstatically outside themselves. Only thus do they exist as personal selves. In this respect human personality is similar to the trinitarian persons. Historically, these features of human personality emerge only in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity as its concept of person, constituted by relations to others, is transferred to anthropology. (Pannenberg 1992, 430)

Pannenberg's model is distinguished from Burhoe's understanding by its stress upon the relational character of personhood, in contrast to Burhoe's emphasis on self-consciousness. Nevertheless, Burhoe would have rejected the criticism that he neglected a personal God. Within his naturalistic interpretation he claimed to have a personal relationship with God—or with Nature, which is the primary translation of God. Every human being is part of nature, which is to some extent both revealed and hidden for us. Thus, we are related as closely as possible to Nature or God.

Of course, this interpretation is provocative for both theologians and scientists, especially in Germany. But provocation need not automatically mean rejection. To my mind, Burhoe's highly coherent naturalistic theology is a source for the German dialogue between science and theology that must be opened up more intensively. For example, it could contribute to discussions about the difference between natural theology and a theology of nature. Furthermore, the fact that Burhoe does not question the existence of God is not only significant in itself but also has constructive implications for the wider discussion of science and theology as well

(cf. Link 1992, 634). It is obvious that this dialogue has to go beyond Burhoe's own approach. Burhoe did not write a final account of his ideas, but he developed his thoughts in accord with the newest information from the sciences. Thus the dynamic, developmental structure seen in Burhoe's thinking provides an impetus for progress beyond every fixed theory in the dialogue between science and theology.

Burhoe himself was a "living dialogue between science and theology." And Burhoe encouraged other people including myself, in his kind and intellectual manner, to deal with this dialogue, to think about the mutual relationship more intensively, and to relate the concepts of each field to the other. This impetus must be given to every new generation of scientists and theologians—in Burhoe's words, it must become part of our culture type. Science and theology may have different perspectives on the world we live in, but it is *one* world. For that reason they belong together and should mutually enrich each other in the future.

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