

Endmatter: Remembering Ralph Wendell Burhoe

BURHOE'S SECOND-HAND INFLUENCE

by Michael Cavanaugh

Abstract. Many of us not part of the “old Burhoe gang” are nonetheless deeply influenced by the ideas of Ralph Wendell Burhoe, albeit in indirect ways. This remembrance summarizes six such ways: Three are “procedural” influences, namely (1) that dialogue is most valuable, especially in the science/religion interface, when carried on among those who may not agree; (2) that scholarship is necessary to refine and improve preliminary opinions; and (3) that organizations are crucial to accomplishing the first two tasks. The three “substantive” influences are (4) Burhoe’s focus on human values; (5) his work in defining God; and (6) his contribution to defining what it means to be human. As is well known, his emphasis in all three substantive cases was on the power and nuances of biological and social evolution, especially on the dynamics of natural selection.

Keywords: Ralph Wendell Burhoe; God; human nature; Institute on Religion in an Age of Science; natural selection; values; *Zygon*.

People always chuckle at my hobby—collecting second-hand handshakes. Then they want to know whose hands I have vicariously shaken, and finally they tell me what notable persons they themselves can add to my collection by offering me their hand.

Despite the light-hearted nature of this hobby, I and those who offer me handshakes are actually doing two valuable things. First we are helping keep alive the memory of those persons whose handshakes we pass on, and second we are demonstrating how closely all the people in the world are connected with one another. On contemplation this second observation seems especially profound. When a backwoods boy from deep in

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Louisiana has collected second-hand handshakes from every recent president, scores of famous artists and entertainers, emperors and royalty, great religious leaders including two popes and the Dalai Lama (with whom I share a second-hand hug, since His Holiness hugs instead of shaking hands), great scientists, and most of my personal intellectual heroes, the recognition of the world's human interconnectedness simply boggles my mind.

Ralph Wendell Burhoe had inspired me for years (ever since I had discovered *Zygon* in the library at Louisiana State University and spent many satisfying hours reading back issues), but I didn't collect his second-hand handshake until 1994, when I first attended the Star Island conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science—eleven years after health problems forced Ralph to quit attending. Ralph died in 1997. Since then his presence has often pervaded mine, as I contemplated how his ideas have influenced me, both directly and indirectly—directly because he left a written record which I have read and tried to assimilate, and indirectly because so many of the people who have had an impact on my life were originally stimulated by him.

There is no way I could know, much less list, all the subtle and indirect ways Burhoe has influenced me both through his writings and through those who were influenced by him, but my musings about him since his death have helped me identify six specific ways I feel his presence daily, and that is what I would like to share through this “second-hand” remembrance. The first three remembrances relate to what I call Ralph's “procedural” contributions to my life, and the last three to his substantive contributions.

First, Burhoe believed it is important to keep talking with one another, not so much with those who agree with us, but with those who disagree with us. It is these people who can keep our thoughts most active and fertile, and correct many basic misunderstandings in fields outside our own. Nowhere is this more important than in the no-man's-land between science and religion, where we tend to gather together in same-sect groupings and reinforce one another's prejudices and misconceptions.

Second, Burhoe believed scholarship is better than simply sharing opinions. While it may be valuable to share our independent perspectives, it is by striving to support (and inevitably correct) our opinions through well-reasoned and refereed sources that we harvest the food most nutritious for our growth together.

Third, Burhoe believed we should expend the effort to participate in organizations, and to establish them where they are needed. Such organizations provide a practical and powerful forum for accomplishing the other two goals above. Two of Burhoe's organizations have touched me deeply. IRAS has allowed me to subject my own thinking to the ideas of

others in deeply personal conversations, with people who may approach issues very differently than I do and yet are committed to dialogue. It also has provided a springboard for establishing new initiatives for bringing about more broadly based discussions in the science-religion interface. Burhoe also founded *Zygon*, which not only gives me the chance to express my own ideas and hone them but, more important, has provided a reservoir of scholarly ideas on which I frequently draw. There are at least a dozen “classic” articles I refer to over and over again, and many more I mine from time to time. *Zygon’s* way of pulling its readership toward the future is almost as important for me as this recordation function, and I eagerly anticipate each new issue, to see what intellectual and emotional opportunity it may provide for me to figuratively shake Burhoe’s hand yet once again, through those who were directly influenced by him. My musings about the science/religion interaction are beginning to be deeply influenced by a new generation of thinkers, people who were not necessarily influenced by Ralph directly, though they were certainly influenced by him indirectly, even if they don’t know it, because both they and I have been touched by those that Ralph touched.

I won’t mention those people here, because this is a remembrance of Ralph, but I feel sure he would affirm that direction in my thinking, because after all, he was not just a person of ideas, but one who realized that ideas are formulated and refined and shared in the context of a community which lives on after one’s own life has ended. May we each and all continue to participate in Ralph and in the community he loved.

So far I have only mentioned “procedural” aspects of Burhoe’s thought—we need to talk, we need to refine our ideas, and we need forums for doing those things. But Burhoe also made important substantive contributions to the very dialogue he fostered. Again, three of his ideas will serve to illustrate the range and power of his thinking.

To me one word above all others captures Ralph’s substantive interests, and that word is *values*. He was immensely interested in how human values evolved, how they play out, how religion encourages them, and how science can validate them. From his first article in *Zygon* (in volume 1, of course) until his last (in volume 23) he explored various nuances of this topic, and one of his early symposia was on values (1971, 82).¹ He saw life as the ultimate value underlying our existence (1967, 78), but he elucidated value in much more detail than that. He defined religion in its terms (1970b, 114), he believed science could figure out human values (1969, 65), and his forward-thinking mind was one of the first to explore the relation of both computers (1972b, 188) and selfish genes (1979, 135) to human values. Incidentally, I still find very few writers who have improved on Burhoe’s analysis of the relation of sociobiology to values. He saw natural selection as the agent for predisposing our actions in

certain directions, and also as the creator of a brain that allows us to override or modify those directions, through individual decisions and especially through social processes.

Ralph's second and third substantive contributions to my life—defining God and defining humanity—are in my opinion straightforward outgrowths of his interest in values. He went to lengths to define God and refused to hide in the vagueness that seems so useful to many thinkers in the science/religion dialogue today. Granted, his definitions were somewhat liberal, but he strove to write clearly so that his concept could be critically evaluated. He was clear that any definition of God (and indeed of any religious concept) has to have biological roots (1975, 299), and he closely identified God with natural selection (1972a, 30). In 1977 (p. 381) he identified God as the “creative source and continuing shaper of the events of everything there may be, the determiner of destiny, upon which man is utterly dependent.” In an earlier contribution (volume 1 in fact: 1966, 93) he used a powerful metaphor, depicting God as a natural force that only *seems* unnatural, like an unseen magnet pulling iron uphill. Those are still a good definition and a good metaphor, and I find them especially useful in my conversations with good Southern evangelicals who are open to seeing God in spiritual, nonfinite terms.

Defining humanity also was important to Ralph, and in retrospect it is perhaps the foremost philosophical and theological challenge of our times. As usual he was just ahead of those times. He made several attempts to define humanity (1973, 432, for example); he emphasized freedom as part of our nature (1975, 333); he again saw natural selection as critical, for example as a source of civilization, which can result from the coadaptation of genes and culture (1977, 342–44; 1976, 263); he saw both pleasure and reason as adaptations to nature's requirements (1982, 113), and the evolution of complexity seemed crucial to his understanding of human intellectual and social life (1970a, 36 and 1977, 344).

It often happens that an artist's work becomes more valuable upon the artist's death, because he or she can never create again. And perhaps specific memories about such a great intellect as Ralph Wendell Burhoe become even sweeter after his death, to those who knew him personally. But for those of us who know only his ideas, the record of those ideas is as powerful as ever, and an evening spent reading them cannot fail to stimulate and educate and to make one feel part of the great and important movement to which Ralph contributed so much. His life makes me covet every chance to pass on his “handshake” to others, and I feel real joy and meaning in the awareness of being influenced by him, in both substantive and organizational ways.

NOTE

1. All my citations are to *Zygon* articles by Burhoe or to one co-authored by him. Therefore my citations provide only the year and page reference of the article cited.

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