Endmatter: Remembering Ralph Wendell Burhoe

BURHOE'S LEGACY: LESSONS FOR EUROPEANS

by Willem B. Drees

Abstract. Ralph Burhoe's ideas have not been well received in European Protestant theology. His approach has been at odds with the dominant resistance to natural theology on the Continent, and it has not fit well with reconciling attempts from the United Kingdom either. However, Burhoe's interest in the role of religions in the emergence of human nature and culture, including the interest in noncognitive functions of religion, should be taken to heart. Besides, he has set an example for Europeans with respect to method in dealing with first-rate science.

Keywords: Ralph Burhoe; European theology; natural theology.

Ralph Burhoe's suggestion that "It makes little difference whether we name it God or natural selection" (1981, 21) seems unpalatable to European Protestant theologians. In this brief essay I will explore why there has been so much resistance to Burhoe's ideas. I do not offer a systematic survey or a statistically supported analysis but rather report on implicit and explicit messages I received when I embarked on the study of theology at the Universities of Amsterdam and Groningen in the 1980s. I will then discuss to what extent the objections seem to me to be still intelligible and justified, concluding with my appreciation for Burhoe's writings and the lessons that Europeans should take to heart from Burhoe's work.

After World War II most Protestant theologians in continental Europe were heavily influenced by dialectical theology as shaped by Karl Barth's

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monumental *Church Dogmatics* (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*). Even students who had not read any of Barth's books, were convinced of at least one thing: natural theology was epistemologically impossible, morally reprehensible, and theologically idolatrous. Natural theology had fallen into disfavor partly because it was associated with theologies that had adapted too much to an ideology of blood, race, and territory, nation (*Blut und Boden*), identifying God's intentions with the intentions of those in power during the Nazi period in Germany. Barth's dialectical theology was held in high esteem because he had inspired the limited number of theologians in the "confessing church" (*bekennende Kirche*) who had protested the persecution of Jews. Relating science to theology seemed to be natural theology—and hence—to use an anachronism— not politically correct. The most common stance in European Protestant theology was a separation of science and theology as virtually unrelated except for the moral issues raised by science-based technologies.

After the Second World War a few theologians, philosophers, and scientists nonetheless engaged in a science-religion dialogue—for example, G. Howe, G. Picht and C. F. von Weizsäcker in Germany; C. J. Dippel and J. M. de Jong in the Netherlands, and T. F. Torrance in the United Kingdom. All of these scholars, however, adhered to the basic stance of dialectical theology in this respect. Not only was the apparent identification of God with any feature of the natural world rejected, but relating God to nature was viewed as way beyond what reasonable Christians could take seriously, partly because they conceived of a theology labeled "natural" as morally lacking.[1]

A consequence has been that Protestant thought, as far as it has been influenced by German theology, has by and large nourished fairly abstract reflections on science and theology. One might discuss perhaps the possibility (or impossibility) of natural theology, but one would not actually do such theology. It was far more acceptable to discuss matters of method and language than to examine the substance of ideas (theories, dogmas). Within this context more interest was shown in the *philosophy* of science (often implicitly apologetic in its emphasis on limitations of science) than in the *results* of science. This move to a "meta" level of discourse has continued, in my opinion, in current discussions on rationality, postmodernism, and the like—not just in Europe but also in the United States.

The term *natural theology* means something quite different in the Anglo-American context. There it is not associated with a politically dubious and socially conservative ideology but with the argument from design and related arguments for the existence of God. Intertwined with polemics about such arguments seems to be a quest for harmony between science and religion, whether at the level of biblical sayings ("the Bible is right after all") or the more subtle level of beliefs about God's intentions

for, and relation to, us. Within this Anglo-American domain of reflections are some who engage in polemical disputes—such as Peter Atkins and Richard Dawkins on the atheist side, and Richard Swinburne and Hugh Montefiore on the theological side—setting the stage for an *either-or* position. Others, such as Arthur Peacocke, take a more moderate course more open to revisions in the religious heritage, seeking to conjoin genuine science and genuine religion.

Growing up in the closing days of the dominance of dialectical theology, I had not heard of Ralph Burhoe until the first European Conference on Science and Religion in Loccum, West Germany, in 1986. There Viggo Mortensen distinguished between two strategies that accommodate science and religion: expansion and restriction. If science expands without boundaries, all human phenomena (including moral and spiritual life) are potentially subject to scientific explanation. According to Mortensen (1987, 197), for someone who desires to defend religion in such a context, "it seems that the only possibility is to hold that evolution's way is God's way, and thus that natural selection is God." In that context, Mortensen refers to Burhoe: "I find Burhoe's expansionist ideas stimulating and provoking. But let me give one remark. Burhoe's idea of revitalizing religion by integrating God into the sciences could actually, against his intentions, lead to the abolishing of religion. When religion can be explained as a mere manifestation of brain functions, and God can be explained by genetics, then religion becomes nothing but words—words that we could just as well do without." Thus, Mortensen seeks a way to articulate a view that gives religion some sort of independence, even if of a restricted kind. Metaphysics, such as that developed by the Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup, should serve as a framework that allows science to coexist with phenomenological analysis and metaphysical speculation.

The immediate background of Mortensen's remarks is no longer the ideological derailment of natural theology, in accordance with the mood that existed at midcentury, but rather the secularization of culture in countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands. Burhoe's program is questioned because it does not offer theology enough independence and thus threatens to make religion superfluous, as it is already in many aspects of social life. (Unlike the situation in the United States, membership in a church is not of much value when one is looking for a job, in need of social support and welfare, or running for political office in Europe.)

In 1988, while a visiting scholar at the Chicago Center for Religion and Science, I met Burhoe personally. He came across as a friendly, interested, and deeply engaged man. I also became acquainted with others who had studied, digested, and appreciated his work extensively, and I too came to appreciate his approach. However, I continue to have some

reservations concerning his thought, reservations that seem to reflect Continental European theology, with its mistrust of natural theology.

If God *is* natural selection, natural selection seems to be God. This suggests that those who have been successful in evolutionary history are those preferred by God. Is God then automatically on the side of the victors rather than of those who suffer? Are power and success to be ranked higher than justice? On the other hand, Burhoe's association emphasizes our dependence upon a reality preceding and surpassing us. A deep sense of dependence is also at the heart of some theological thought (by, for example, F. Schleiermacher). But even then, natural selection is far too specific and limited a concept to characterize the reality upon which we depend.

Even for those who steer away from the association of religion with magic and miracles, identification of God with any natural phenomenon (not only such abstract, indirect ones as power and success) seems problematic. If the identification is successful, the religious language becomes superfluous and can be abandoned, as Mortensen observed; and if the identification fails, something important may be expressed in, or achieved by, the religious language that is not caught in the scientific transposition. Then it becomes important to explicate in what sense God is *not* natural selection.

Despite holding such reservations concerning one of Burhoe's characteristic statements, I also found something very attractive about his approach. Most attempts at a modern, science-based formulation of old religious concepts seemed too defensive and apologetic, too restricted by the contingent theological heritage of the author concerned. Burhoe's emphasis on power as the defining characteristic of God may also be understood as a consequence of a particular Calvinist influence; for instance, the Lutheran Gerd Theissen (1984) emphasized tolerance, variation, and grace in a study that otherwise shows various affinities with Burhoe's approach. Although he too comes from a particular tradition, Burhoe has allowed himself more freedom from that tradition than many others, for the sake of a deeper engagement with contemporary scientific insights.

"God equals natural selection" is no longer so central in my understanding and appreciation of Burhoe. The statement still seems almost bizarre to me, especially for the reasons just mentioned: the association of God with power and success, and the suggestion that theological and scientific expressions can be conflated.

What is, in my opinion, the more significant contribution made by Burhoe is to be found in the reflection on religions (rather than in his particular reformulation of the concept of God, which has seriously damaged the receptiveness to his program). Too often, discussions on science and

theology seem to treat the two as competing views of reality, which approach in turn leads to thinking of them as being either in conflict or in harmony. Whereas this may be a way to look at the interaction when one is concerned with ultimate explanations in the realm of cosmology, choosing one or the other bypasses the fact that religions are also phenomena in the world, phenomena that are the object of scientific study.

When one thinks of the questions that arise in relation to evolutionary insights, there seem to be two quite different clusters of questions. One cluster treats scientific and religious ideas as similar in that both seek to understand the same reality. Examples are the argument from design, disputes about how to understand texts from Scripture, and explorations into ways of envisaging divine action in an evolving world. However, human beings, with their nature and culture, are themselves not merely studying the world; they are also part of it. In that context, one may explore the possibility of a scientific, evolutionary explanation of the emergence and persistence of religions. In an evolutionary perspective, religions are not just historically contingent entities that happen to be there. It can be presumed that they must have served certain purposes.

Religions may well have contributed to the evolutionary process through which human beings emerged. Burhoe has placed this question on the agenda, at least for me. Characteristic of this facet of Burhoe's work are titles of such articles as "Religion's Importance as Seen in Natural History" (1984) and "Religion's Role in Human Evolution: The Missing Link between Ape-Man's Selfish Genes and Civilized Altruism" (1979). He and others influenced by him have explored these issues further in studies on the development of the central nervous system and the human being as having genetic and cultural natures that exist in symbiosis. Burhoe has raised questions that are not really addressed by most other authors of theology-and-science works in the same era, such as Peacocke and Ian Barbour. The questions concern not just a matter of scientific description and explication but the subsequent one of how such insights are integrated into our humanist and religious concerns today (see, for example, Hefner 1993).

In my opinion Burhoe's most lasting contribution is that he has placed a whole realm of questions on the agenda. This has made clear—although the point is still insufficiently appreciated—that the interaction between religion and science cannot be treated exclusively as a dispute between theology and natural science (physics, biology) about how their modes of understanding of the world fit together. Religions are not merely theological ideas but complexes of rituals and myths that have functioned in human communities. In the four oldest universities of the Netherlands, theology is primarily studied in secular departments of religious studies. Students training for ministry often experience this as a threatening

environment, one that perceives their beloved tradition as a social and historical phenomenon no different from the many other religions of the world. If there is a future for religion, however, given our further knowledge, and if that future is not to be in isolation from the general culture, theologians and religious leaders will have to engage in the secular, evolutionary, nonreligionist study of religions.

There are genuine disputes about cosmology, evolutionary explanations, and conceptions of divine action, but just as important is the dispute about the functions of religions as value systems, shaping social and individual life. Should religions be dismissed and eradicated? Is religion a virus, as Dawkins (1993) has written? Or may one recognize the positive contributions of religions to the emergence of human civilization, as Daniel Dennett (1995, 518) does? Burhoe has invited us to ponder such questions, arguing that the practices and beliefs of traditions deserve prima facie respect as well-winnowed wisdom. His work also places before us the challenge to employ insights about the evolution of religions in the quest to articulate religions in the current context.

A second major lesson from Burhoe's work, aside from the substantial agenda, concerns a basic matter of method or, rather, attitude. Burhoe has throughout his career sought to work with first-rate scientists and to reflect on mainstream science. The worst sin in religious and theological reflection dealing with the sciences is, in my opinion, to invent one's own science. Too often, theologians tend to operate very selectively or jump to scientific ideas that are at best marginal in regular science if not squarely at odds with it. One cannot have one's own science or a world of one's own. If the world does not fit our metaphysical categories or religious preferences, we cannot say "too bad for the world" but should, rather, abandon our cherished categories. When the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg moves from nonlinear thermodynamics to philosophical and theological anthropology, the geneticist-theologian Lindon B. Eaves rightly raises the question: "Does [his work] address scientific anthropology where it 'hurts' most or is it merely an eclectic aggregation of those anthropological ideas which are most convenient for theology?' (1989, 203; 1997, 327). This inventing of one's own science is not just a habit of theologians; much literature on spirituality and science, as well as on spirituality in general, suffers from selective shopping and a preference for the weird and marginal over mainstream science. The best antidote, though success is not guaranteed, is to make practicing scientists of various disciplines partners in the process, having them look over the shoulders of theologians and to supervise the use of their discipline. The scientists need not agree with the particular way in which their insights are used in a philosophical or religious context, but they must at least assess whether

their own and related disciplines are fairly presented. Burhoe has, both as editor of *Zygon* and in his own writings, set an example in relating to genuine science.

To conclude, I would say that Burhoe's particular theological statement that God is natural selection is not so profound as the attitude he has shown in relating to science and the agenda he has left—namely, the challenge to reflect upon the emergence of religions and religion's role in the natural history of our species and cultures, and to move beyond an anthropological study to a religious appreciation of those insights.

NOTE

1. The bibliography of J. Hübner (1987) offers a far more extensive view of the scene. In this volume, Sigurd Daecke (p. 33) signals "*die entgegengesetzte Grundtendenz*," the opposite tendencies which appear in the literature in English and in German: one explores a close relationship between God and the scientifically known world, whereas the other sees the relationship as close to indifference, arguing (for instance) for a methodological separation.

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