

# Credo

## THE HEART OF MY CONCERN

by *Ralph Wendell Burhoe*

*Abstract.* This brief piece summarizes the author's lifelong personal credo, particularly his attempt to translate traditional religious wisdom into modern scientific concepts. Contemporary science reveals to us the vast system of natural processes that has brought the universe, our planet, and our species into existence. This natural system is in fact a "more-than-human 'Lord of History,'" corresponding to traditional ideas of God. This Lord of History not only has created us but also sustains us—not just externally but also our interior psychic and spiritual nature. We are challenged to discern the requirements that this system of natural processes places upon us; if we conform to these requirements, we shall be blessed, and we will be enabled as co-creators of our future evolution.

*Keywords:* adaptations; Lord of History; religious wisdom; translations of theology.

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I have sought to interpret religion in the light of modern scientific views of reality, including the reality of religion. I have suggested some translations between scientific accounts of religious wisdom and the accounts of earlier prescientific myths, philosophies, or theologies.

My theology suggests that today's scientific views of evolving cosmic reality seem to be as firm as any traditional theological interpretation ever was in saying that there is an objective, more-than-human "Lord of History." Most scientists of our evolutionary history say that some system of reality and its laws, often called the cosmos, permeates all events, including those of the earth and its life, including each human body, feeling, mind, and thought.

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While careful scientists tend to be humble before infinities and ultimates, it seems quite clear that, during the past few billion years, cosmic evolution created the earth, out of the dust of the earth created prehuman and human life, and remains the sustainer and determiner of all destiny. Clear also is the picture that the salvation of humans now and in the future can come only if we continue, as did our ancestors, to adapt to what this sovereign system provides and requires. Not only in the evolution of our genes did we thus adapt, but so also do we adapt in cultural evolution, including culture's sacred-value or religious core, and in the development of our personal life. To the extent we fail to do so we ultimately pay the penalties: a diminished level of life or no life at all. The seemingly invariant ground rules of selection and evolution (cosmic, biological, and cultural) suggest our optimal strategy for life in the future is to continue to search for and fulfill the requirements, and to enjoy the rewards, of this magnificent program of evolving life.

It is my view that the sciences add more than vital new evidence for the credibility of the essential wisdom of ancient theologies in recognizing the reality of a system of superhuman power that created, sustains, and selects us according to how well we meet its requirements for human life and advancement. The sciences also add far clearer evidence than we have had previously that the essential reality of evolving human life includes much more than our bodies: something as "inner" to us as our genes and innermost "feelings" and also something as lasting as "immortal souls." In the scientific picture, human bodies, feelings, thoughts, and societies are only some of the more visible wave crests on the surface of the not-easy-to-see depths of the river of the reality that is central to our minds and bodies. I have suggested that in the realm symbolized by this deep-river model of our reality we find help from the sciences for a modern and credible response to the ancient religious quest for meaning and hope in the face of so much tragic suffering and death. We can sense more meaning and joy as we become better informed of the more significant and enduring core of our nature.

Our new translations of theology in the light of recent science help provide a renewed religious vision. This is a correction of the widespread view that science threatens religion and human values. That view seems to have increased in the past century or two as most philosophers, religious authorities, and scientists increasingly supposed that confrontations of science/religion or fact/value were mutually harmful or even logically illegitimate. This led to a divorce between religious and scientific thinking, with religion becoming less real and less important to the intellectual and practical leaders of civilization. But recently, certain scientific and religious leaders have been opening doors that promise benefits for faith and human salvation exactly through a reunion of theology with an "ob-

jective” and scientific view of reality. Here important religious wisdom is being revitalized by the very light of the new sciences.

These leaders have come to see that the most recent accounts of cosmic creation and evolution, including life and humanity on earth, lead to conclusions akin to those from the ancient accounts of a system of gods or one God. We did not make ourselves but are creatures of a universal system. And the ultimate rules (and their enforcement) for the game of life are beyond our powers to change. We can see how humans have been selected by the supreme system of power to rise above the level of our ape-man cousins, largely through a new and non-genetic mode of heritage—cultural evolution.

Here science helps us clarify the ancient question—What is our place in this scheme of things? Through the system’s selection of cultures and of the correlated functions in our brains, we can see ourselves to be creatures elevated by the creator to be willful, conscious, more highly informed agents on behalf of the creator’s ongoing program of new creation. But we should note that, fortunately for us when we are not able to make the right choices, the ultimate system of power has selected our cultures (and hence us) to become, particularly in their value-laden and religiously motivating cores, sufficiently harmonized with our inside genetic information and with our outside ecosystem so that our life is continued. By our own powers alone we could not create ourselves, sustain ourselves, or advance up the evolutionary steps. But we are privileged to participate in the increase of our range of viability and creativity by our adapting to reality’s requirements. This enhances our capacity as co-creators of future evolution. It seems clear that humans are given a significant purpose, meaning, and role.

With our minds more adequately informed of the ultimate sovereignty manifest in the power of this evolutionary history, and also informed of our special role and destiny within this system, we have the privilege of entering a more blessed and more effective path of life. We can now see how we can recapture, with the help of new scientific authenticity, some of the virtues of ancient religious truths. We can see how greater moral wisdom and motivation can be elicited within us as we harmonize with the opportunities and requirements given us by the supreme power. We are beginning to see how we can act to bring our culturally shaped goals into greater harmony: with the best of our own earlier cultural heritage; with other cultures (even those alien and hostile to us); with the more ancient, life-bestowing wisdom selected in our genes; and, in short, with ever more of the requirements of the very objective, omnipotent Lord of History, which, we can now more clearly say, is “mindful of man.” Because of all this, I believe we stand at the dawn of the world’s most advanced religious age.

NOTE

This article is taken from a letter that the author wrote to Sir John Templeton 21 January 1988. Templeton had asked for a brief statement that represented what Burhoe considered to be his most important thinking. The article is adapted from Burhoe's "The Human Prospect and the 'Lord of History,'" which appeared in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 10 (September 1975): 299–375.