

RALPH BURHOE AND TEILHARD DE CHARDIN: AN AFFINITY IN MYSTICISM?

by James S. Nelson

Abstract. Religious experience is conditioned and influenced by our understanding of reality, and scientific knowledge contributes to that understanding. Spirituality will be related to knowledge of nature in that experience of God will be mediated in and through a relation to the universe and out of the fulfillment of the creation. Thus a mystical knowledge of God is experienced in and out of a developing evolution of nature, society, and culture. Ralph Burhoe and Teilhard de Chardin share a vision of mystical unity with God as arising out of an integration involving the systems of nature and society.

Keywords: culture; evolution; mediation; mysticism; nature; spirituality.

A question not often asked in Christian theology is, What is the relation between religious experience and science and its various findings at different times in history? The knowledge that issues from the scientific endeavor has significantly influenced theological understanding and the way documents of religion are interpreted. It is the case, as part of the hermeneutic circle, that religious propositions, to be meaningful, must illumine reality, and the way that aspects of reality are understood casts light on the meaning of religious statements and the way they are experienced. If an understanding of God and reality arise together, a person's religious experience is tied to the reality known and conditioned by it. Religious experience, or devotion to God, is not something that happens in the inner life of a person as a direct, unmediated experience of God. Our experience of

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God arises out of what we understand to be a comprehensive view of reality, of which we are sometimes only implicitly aware. If our vision of things entire is faulty, so will be our experience of God, who is beyond, behind, in, and through the reality that enfolds us and brings us to being. There is no doubt that scientific knowledge contributes to our vision of the world and plays an important part in shaping religious experience. What is needed is an integrative vision that will stamp a person's religious experience in such a way that it will fit into the best we know and motivate individuals to live at their best.

William James was correct when he said that "a man's vision is the great fact about him." The significant thing about Ralph Burhoe's religious vision is that it is commanding and pervasive, integrating various fields of knowledge into a framework that is undergirded by a religious foundation. Burhoe is the founding editor of *Zygon* and a winner of the Templeton Award for Progress in Religion. He has been a visionary organizer of such groups as the Institute For Religion in an Age of Science and the Star Island Conference. Through his books and articles, Burhoe has tried to meet the challenge of constructing a religious worldview on the basis of a scientific perspective.

The question addressed here is whether Burhoe's thought expressed in such writings as *Toward a Scientific Theology* is adequate in its aspect of providing a contemporary spirituality to motivate and enrich the modern person. Our analysis of this question will proceed by way of comparison and contrast with another great religious visionary, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who considered himself a pioneer in religious experience. Teilhard was a French Catholic priest, educated in science, who practiced it for much of his life. His experience of nature as a medium through which the presence of God shines was central to an understanding of Christianity informed by the various disciplines of science. The biologist-philosopher Joseph Needham is unqualified in his praise of the significance of Teilhard's work. In his estimation "Father Teilhard was called to be the greatest prophet of this age. That will become more and more clear, I believe, as time goes on" (King 1980, 7). Burhoe and Teilhard have in common the conviction, in the words of Julian Huxley, "that theology needs a scientific foundation" and "that religion is part of the evolutionary process" (King 1980, 7, 187). How to translate this conviction into a program whereby science and religion can achieve integration is a question these two thinkers have thought deeply about, whose answers have something in common but differ as well. Something of how the methods of Burhoe and Teilhard compare forms part of the development of the discussion that follows.

In 1947 Teilhard wrote to the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier a letter explaining something of the basis of his methodology of relating science and religion.

When we speak of a “theology of modern science,” it obviously does not mean that by itself science can determine an image of God and a religion. But what it does mean, if I am not mistaken, is that, given a certain development of science, certain representations of God and certain forms of worship are ruled out, as not being homogeneous with the dimensions of the universe known to our experience. (Teilhard 1968, 221)

For Teilhard, science has introduced three modifications into our thinking that inform directly the understanding of God’s relation to the world. The first is that the universe is to be understood as an organic totality. Every element of the world, every event, is related to, influenced, and understood by its being a part of the space-time continuum of the whole of reality. Second, the world is characterized by an atomicity whereby its foundation is made up of elementary particles discovered to be smaller and more vast in number the more deeply we plumb the depths of matter. These events are ordered according to the equations of statistical mechanics, so that events are now characterized by elements of chance and tentative gropings. Third, as the relation of the first two suggests, the arrangement of the elements of reality tend toward greater unification, consciousness being allied with the most elaborated level of hierarchical order. It is within this framework that the great realities of Christian theology must be understood, and any part of theology not in consonance with these parameters is to be rejected.

Teilhard was convinced that religious experience will increasingly be personally integrated into a framework informed by the characteristics of reality implicit in a view of the world mediated by science and by those characteristics just enumerated. A new spirituality that is more positively related to the physical universe will develop, and people will experience God in and through their relation to the universe and out of the fulfillment of the creation. For Teilhard, *spirituality* refers to the developing centering of self-conscious awareness, where deeper levels of integrative unity are achieved that ever reach beyond that spirituality to greater unification. Such an experience of unity is actualized in relation to God but not apart from the developing unity of every dimension of the cosmos, whether physical, personal, or social. Human beings find integration and unity with God not in some special inner experience but in solidarity with the community of persons embedded in the entire creation. Teilhard labels this spirituality a “new mysticism,” or the “road of the West,” because it is a spirituality rising out of Christianity, which is the religion most in harmony with evolution and the consummation of the cosmos.

The new religion of the future will be based on a new mysticism arising out of the tradition of Christianity but informed by insights from Eastern religions. Mysticism as it is traditionally understood is usually identified with inner states of consciousness characterized by a unitive experience either understood to be fusion with the divine (or reality), or a union with

God, while identity is retained. Here an inner experience is not correlated with the external world. God is sought in *discontinuity* from earthly existence, either physically or humanly. Teilhard affirms a mysticism “from below,” as the time vector affects all the activities of human beings. The discovery that nothing happens independently of time was one of the implications of an evolutionary vision of reality, defined in a larger sense as development and growth. What follows is that no human experience is not influenced by dimensions of existence external to a person. Teilhard envisages the entire process of evolution as tending in the direction of a developing interiorization and spiritualization that are taking place through the process of higher levels of integration characterized by unification. Thus the human experience of mysticism is embodied in this process as a cultural phenomenon that also finds itself formed by the physical world and the experience of God in and through matter. Teilhard makes the claim that “without mysticism, there can be no successful religion; and there can be no well-founded mysticism apart from faith in some unification of the universe” (Teilhard 1975, 40). Thus union with the Absolute is achieved only by immersion in a world in evolution, where the multiplicity found in reality achieves a convergence in an underlying unity toward which the process is moving. Here we have not a mysticism of escape from the world but of involvement. Movement, therefore, is the basis of spirituality. The mystic is an activist, passing out of him- or herself into the converging flux, for “man has no value save for that part of himself which passes into the universe”; “Nothing is precious save what is yourself in others and others in yourself” (Teilhard 1965a, 65, 62).

It is evident that Teilhard’s understanding of religious experience is closely tied to his attempt to integrate the worldviews of religion and science. He understands both activities to be concerned with the discovery and achievement of ultimate unity. Teilhard’s mystical vision coheres with the findings of modern science. Religion is seen as humanity’s experience of communion and union with God through the movement of the unification of the world. The person as embodied and constituted by being in the world experiences God by what is done in and through the world to achieve its unification and, in that process, her own increasing centered integration. Here wholeness with God is not attained without a corresponding unification with nature and society. The new mysticism is correlated with the external world precisely by being a mysticism of evolution.

There is no doubt that Burhoe and Teilhard both loved the earth, finding it a fount of creative energy in which God may be found. For Burhoe “there [are] reasons to stand in awe of the program of creative evolution, to praise its wonder and glory, to be grateful for the grace that brought us into being and set before us a responsibility for the maintenance and advancement of life” (Burhoe 1981, 44). Nature in its function of producing

and maintaining humanity has the function of God in Burhoe's *Toward a Scientific Theology*. The experience of nature in its fullness results in religious experience, for here ultimate concern is found. There is reason to believe that varieties of nature mysticisms find fulfillment in noble emotions of high religious experience.

Teilhard's early experiences with nature were suffused with deep mystical delight and fascination. He was drawn to a religion of nature by its substantiality—its “consistence,” as he described it. As his thought developed, nature could not carry the freight of his deepest religious experiences because nature was finally transient. Nevertheless, Teilhard's experience of God was always mediated through nature, but only because he had most deeply experienced God in his inner consciousness and was therefore open to God's being present in all things. Burhoe's theology is able to complement Teilhard's by using significantly more of the physical and social sciences to fill in Teilhard's vision, which was predominantly religious and poetic.

The purpose of religion, according to Burhoe, is to achieve organization, order, and life in the midst of stress, where life is threatened. Religion seeks to describe the truth of a world-system in terms of providing the assurance that life and organization will be maximized. Science reveals that life with its processes of self-organization is a system of order that is made possible by interactions' taking place in the environment, issuing in the adaptation of an entity or population of entities, for the purpose of continuing or increasing the order of the total system.

Teilhard envisions the developing, increasing complexity of the world, producing more centered wholes and greater interiorization as more elaborate hierarchies evolve. The highest unity is personal self-consciousness, always striving for greater wholeness of spirit. Through this process, evolution, by building up greater centered unities, proceeds to spirit and is experienced as the Absolute Spirit, the source of love. For Teilhard, the Christian vision of this highest unity is identified as God in Christ, who fills the entire process principally as its proper end. The focus of God's love, manifested in Christ, shows that spirit is embodied in matter. The very being of the world is personalized by a Christogenesis. The unpublished diaries of Teilhard's latter years express his purpose as follows: “My line: to synthesize mysticism and evolution (cosmic effort: detachment and synthesis). Union implies unification, that is to say, an evolutionary mystical union” (King 1980, 202).

In Teilhard's spiritual development the sense of the presence of God was assumed by the natural, the divine by the evolutive, so that God is to be loved “in and through all things.” God may be loved as such because out of the future comes the transcendent God, who combines a “God of the Ahead” and a “God of the Above.” Faith in God is both ascensional (rising to a transcendent) and propulsive (driving toward an immanent), forming

a single focus of energy to transform the earth by love into a divine form. The spiritual is not an attenuation of the material but the material carried beyond itself. In and through the transformation of the earth by love, a higher form of personalization occurs. In *The Divine Milieu* this action is understood as the way of union with God: "To begin with, in action I cleave to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living prolongation. And since there is nothing more personal in a being than its will, I merge myself, in a sense, through my heart, with the very heart of God" (Teilhard 1960, 31). Here we have the basis for Teilhardian spirituality.

In common with Teilhard's vision, Burhoe's *Toward a Scientific Theology* is a theology of the earth, a theology from below. Here too a congruence with the general scientific picture is expected of a religious understanding of life. Teilhard attempts to show how religion and science mutually influence one another and can be in harmony. Burhoe proposes to demonstrate how the results of a scientific understanding of reality may be experienced in a way that can validly be shown to be religious. The approaches of Burhoe and Teilhard appear to be decisively different; but closer examination reveals surprising similarities. For instance, Burhoe asks, "Can the scientific picture of man's place in the system be translated so as to lead man to feelings of security, salvation, joy, even ecstasy?" (Burhoe 1981, 45)

The answer to this question takes us to the heart of Burhoe's vision of religion understood in a scientific context. From its original derivation, which is "to bind together," religion has the function for Burhoe of integrating human beings with their environment, whether physical or social. Because many aspects of the various sciences seek to describe and understand the self-organization of adaptive systems, both physical and social, as a goal of inquiry, it is seen as desirable for Burhoe to tie religion more closely to the knowledge the various sciences disclose. In fact, religion today is precisely unbelievable for many because it is dissociated from the sciences. Religion becomes a credible vision of reality only when it is shown to be espoused by the sciences as an intelligible system whereby persons can implement their ties to society and the cosmos.

Religion enters into the center of the debate for Burhoe regarding how altruistic behavior is to be understood and accounted for. It is noted that whereas genetically related species exhibit a high degree of cooperation, the less genetic identity obtaining between individuals leads to a diminishment of cooperative activity. The scientific validity of religion rests on its being able to explain how altruistic behavior is possible given the significant lack of kin relationships in which cooperative behavior is evident. It is the function of religion as a value system to explain and motivate for cooperative behavior left unexplained by lack of family relatedness. Here we have the reason for the origin of religion and its purpose. Burhoe un-

derstands society to be an organism whose various parts achieve an adaptive balance through the working of many factors, at the heart of which is religion, inculcating values centered on sacrificial love and motivating for other-regarding behavior. Thus religions, as an aspect of the culture type, function “analogously to the common geno-type that bonds the members of the primitive organic societies such as social insects” (Burhoe 1981, 187).

The center of Burhoe’s religious vision is the development of an understanding of order coadapting the human genetic program with a culture type. As this culture type is informed by religious values that give a common focus to human behavior, the individual’s private and social activities are joined, and individuals find a oneness in social and spiritual fellowship. The individual becomes aware of a new being transcending personal reality as a social organism. This adaptive genotypic-culturetypic symbiosis integrated into the total ecosystem issues in an experienced unity with all creation. Brains are programmed to experience ecstasy and deep spiritual satisfaction when such adaptation occurs. Intense religious experience, equivalent to mystical union, takes place as the frustrations of self-centeredness surrender to the higher self embodied in the social organism. Burhoe would explain mystical experience as a felt unity with the environment. Embodied consciousness is consistently related to embodied unity with the total systems of society and nature.

Teilhard understands the issuance of adaptive functions of nature in increasing centered unities as implying a superhuman center of consciousness toward which the converging evolutionary process is proceeding. Personal centers of human consciousness situated within converging socially evolving cultural unities, manifesting a spiritual nature, find fulfillment in a process leading to a superhuman center which he names “the Christic.” In “The Christic,” an essay written a month before his death in 1955, Teilhard expresses the heart of his religious experience: “There has been the persistent individualization, at the center of my own small ego, of an ultra-Center of Thought and Action: in the depths of my consciousness, the rise which nothing can stop, of a sort of Other who could be even more I than I am myself” (Teilhard 1978, 82). At the heart of his own experience, and therefore of the matter that produced him, is the presence of an incarnate divine being, universal in nature. The growing convergence to some Ultrahuman, the Christic sense, determined that spirituality must not be defined by the idea of dematerialization but understood by a “new God of the Ahead,” who fulfills through love the evolution of matter culminating in the personal, focused in its fulfillment in Christ, the embodiment of God’s love.

With reference to Burhoe, it may be asked whether an account of a religious vision that puts forward altruistic behavior as its basis can dispense with a reality of love and freedom greater than finite reality but upon

which such reality depends. More to the point is the question of whether it makes sense, both intellectually and emotionally, for the human individual to adapt to a reality whose highest focus of participation in ultimate meaning is impersonal. To use the concept of spirit developed in Bernard Meland's *The Realities of Faith*, spirit describes the sensitivity of communal relations with centers of freedom each with the other. It is out of this matrix of relationships that spirit in the human being arises. The ground of spirit is an ontological one based on a metaphysics of internal relations. The ultimate foundation of spirit comes to be experienced by "being grasped by this order of sensitivity which is in God as a communal ground of experience" (Meland 1962, 227).

The issue here is the nature of the personal context, embedded in natural and social processes, out of which the sacred or divine reality arises, and whether the basis of altruistic love is more than these processes. This problem is neither new nor unique. Finding an understanding of this issue is not easy.

It can be cogently argued that Burhoe and Teilhard incorporate elements of pantheism into their theology. If *pantheism* is defined as a system of thought that identifies the whole of reality in its unity (or particular elements of reality) with the divine, Burhoe's theology can justly be described as pantheistic. In Burhoe's words: "I shall use the term 'god' to denote the total sovereign system, which in scientific language may be said to be the total cosmic ecosystem including the details of the local ecosystems on earth"; "The modern sciences go a good deal further than any previous revelations in making clear and valid the hypothesis that 'god' is one, or a single system of related parts"; and "the term 'god' [is used] as the totality of the natural world rather than as a being beyond nature, a supernatural being" (Burhoe 1981, 124, 126). To define God in this way is not in itself to place it out of court as a valid concept. Its implications may lead to a richer and more relevant understanding of God without our assenting to the basic proposal.

As a way of showing how such implications can be developed, it may be helpful to follow the approach of Wolfhart Pannenberg. For instance, if we take Pannenberg's definition of God as the all-determining reality, or the reality that determines everything, the way in which this claim is substantiated is how well it accounts for reality as experienced. For Pannenberg the reality of God emerges with other objects in experience: "Theology as the science of God would then mean the study of the totality of the real from the point of view of the reality which ultimately determines it both as a whole and in its parts" (Pannenberg 1976, 303). The claims of a religious tradition would be tested against its ability to integrate the variety of modern experience into the meaning of reality expressed by the religion.

It is clear that Burhoe's proposal is an attempt to carry out the method-

ological program of Pannenberg in developing a science of God. By understanding religion as the revelation of God in the process of nature that produced life, Burhoe has claimed to account for the truth of religion by a scientific theology. Without “elements intrinsic to nature as the source, creator, and judge of man” (Burhoe 1981, 81) integrated within a theological system, it is impossible to believe in a living God. The god of much traditional religion is a superman god who was seen to be “dissociated from the realm of the laws that do in fact rule nature” (Burhoe 1981, 81). When these laws are extended to the culture type and religion is shown to be a necessary explanatory part of the total system, a scientific theology will stand clear for all to see and follow. It is in Burhoe’s attempt to find in the social sciences order and laws that give guidance for human flourishing (including religion as a social system), that the truth and credibility of religion find a standing. For this to happen God must be identified with “nature’s intrinsic, hidden preference” and hence must be pantheistically conceived.

Teilhard is willing to call his understanding of Christianity pantheistic, not because nature or any part of it is to be identified with the divine but because God has identified with nature as embodied in Christ. Teilhard explains his perception of pantheism this way: “Pantheized: no longer to adhere vitally to God through some central and specifically favored point of our being; but to communicate, to ‘super-communicate,’ with him (without fusion or confusion—for as love unites its terms, so it differentiates and personalizes them) through all the height, the depths and the multiplicity of the organic powers of space and time” (Teilhard 1965b, 137).

Added to this is the christological emphasis, or “the science of Christ running through all things,” so that the world is being personalized. Someone is in gestation in the universe, and it is now possible, even imperative, to love evolution. It is Teilhard’s conviction that certain New Testament texts teach a christological pantheism and that cosmic redemption cannot really be understood until evolution is seen as a universal phenomenon. It is God’s plan “to unite all things in him” (Ephesians 1:10 RSV). The body of Christ is “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:23). Colossians 3:11 states that “Christ is all in all.” In Christ all things were created, and “in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). For Teilhard there is union of God and the universe. While some would praise God as pure spirit, Teilhard felt he must exalt the extension of God’s “incarnate Being in the world of matter.” Though transcendent, the divine is experienced as bound into all levels of being. The mystic realizes that the act of communion does not take place in a divine or created sphere alone,

but in a special reality born of their mutual interaction. The mystical milieu is not a completed zone in which beings, once they have succeeded in entering it, remain immobilized. It is a complex element, made up of divinized created being. . . . We cannot give it precisely the name of God: it is his Kingdom. Nor can we say that it is: it is in the process of becoming. (Teilhard 1965b, 137)

The basis for Teilhard's mystical vision lies in an embodied mysticism where matter and nature in all its levels constitute the sacramental medium for the experience of union with God. For Teilhard the world is increasingly personalized through the evolving Christ through love. However, this personalized mysticism is not centered on an individualized experience of the divine but on God involved in the processes of nature and culture. Teilhard called his vision a "new mysticism," or an "unknown form of religion" (Teilhard 1970, 383). This religion is, of course, Christianity, but "Christianity re-incarnated for the second time in the spiritual energies of Matter" (Teilhard 1978, 96).

We may ask what constitutes a scientific theology and whether it is desirable to develop one. While sharing certain significant similarities relating to the theme of religious experience, as well as desiring to relate science and religion, Burhoe and Teilhard differ on their understanding of God. Let us, in conclusion, summarize and evaluate these differences.

- It is Burhoe's purpose to translate the realities of religion into scientific knowledge and terminology. Teilhard seeks to show that scientific knowledge and the Christian revelation are in accord and that religion provides the ultimate meaning for the natural process and human purpose. A scientific theology is desirable if it demonstrates the unity of knowledge. According to Burhoe, reducing religion to the processes of nature and society does not seem valid. In this sense, theology is not scientific, and it is not desirable that it be so.
- God is not the world. A dualism between God and the world seems to be required for a Christian understanding of God and also for religious experience understood in a personal mode. That a person experiences God as a "power making for righteousness," to use Matthew Arnold's words, is a moral phenomenon arising out of love. This makes no final sense unless God has personal qualities out of which love originates. As Teilhard is at pains to point out, however, love admits of no fusion or identification. Therefore, God and the world must in some sense be separate, and the divine transcendent. Because love seeks to achieve union, while maintaining differentiation, the divine assumes a form within the world to achieve final unification of all things. This process and its goal may be called an "integrative dualism." The dualism of God and the world assumes the personal qualities of God and substantiates the claim that love is the ultimate in God. In that Burhoe's scientific theology does not make such claims (for Burhoe, God is in some sense identified with the world), his position lacks coherence as a religious system and therefore puts in doubt whether a scientific theology of a God of love is possible and desirable.

- For many the heart of Christian theology is the action of love embodied in the reality of Jesus Christ. The dimension of grace expressed in Christ is left unexplored in Burhoe's theology. The quality Christ's life expressed and the power manifest in his reality are central to the Christian religion. The teachings of Jesus Christ express values that have long informed Western thought on religion. Burhoe's scientific grounding of religion needs to have the reality symbolized in Christ and the ethics of Jesus integrated into the framework of his culturetypic analysis of the validity of religion. Toward this end Arthur Peacocke's extended and creative chapter, "Evolved Man and God Incarnate," in *Creation and the World of Science* (1979), provides a significant beginning—as do some of the process theologians' and Bernard Meland's writings. It may not be possible to have a "science of Christ," although Teilhard's religious vision has a focal place for Christ in a theology purported to be in harmony with scientific knowledge.

The test of a theology related to science or articulated in terms of science is whether its assertions refer to knowledge of the world, whether it illuminates by its coherence a framework able to integrate available knowledge, and whether it is testable by methods appropriate to it. Theodosius Dobzhansky sets forth an answer whereby a criterion of values may be judged that can also be related to the measure of validity in theology:

I know of no better one than that proposed by the ancient Chinese sage: "Every system of moral laws must be based upon man's own consciousness, verified by the common experience of mankind, tested by due sanction of historical experience and found without error, applied to the operation and processes of nature in the physical universe and found to be without contradiction, laid before the gods without question or fear, and able to wait a hundred generations and have it confirmed without doubt by a Sage of posterity." (Dobzhansky 1963, 153)

Teilhard, by his setting of religious experience within the context of evolution, and Burhoe, by *Toward a Scientific Theology*, have contributed imaginatively to this endeavor.

NOTE

I am indebted to Ursula King's *Towards a New Mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (King 1980) for the general thesis underlying this essay.

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