

Buitendag Festschrift preface



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In a situation of crisis such as the present, the value of a human being, leader and scholar of the stature of Johan Buitendag should be treasured. There is all reason to celebrate his 70th year and all that the previous years brought, with the sincere wish that the coming years will continue to be the occasion for continued fruitful achievement. His moral and intellectual courage and ability, coupled with a wise style of institutional leadership, provides a unique example of the kind of thought and action required in our present liminal time of uncertainty and looming disaster, in which the ecological threat is prominent. It is indeed a privilege for the contributors to this volume to express their sincere appreciation of a remarkable person.

The *academic achievement* of Buitendag, both in output and quality, with special reference to his concentration on the interface between Christian theology and natural science, with ecology as central concern (starting early as young student, reaching a peak with his doctoral thesis of 1985, and continued throughout his career as professor of theology at the University of Pretoria), inspires admiration and confidence. There is no contemporary challenge more serious to theology than the ecological crisis and the coming to terms with contemporary natural science. Johan Buitendag, with his ecodomic emphasis on the theological understanding of creation as a dimension of harmony and beauty, manifestation of divine love, is a pioneer of such an enterprise. It is time for a new beginning, rooted in the decaying and decayed yet rich compost of the best of the past, of a tree with new branches in several directions, including the relationship between theology and nature, and between religions and a cosmology suggested by science.

As matters stand at present, four major Christian religious and theological responses to the challenge may be distinguished, with Buitendag transcending all four and exploring a new path:

- The avoidance of direct confrontation, even meeting, with the natural sciences could be described as a state of satisfaction and comfort with a style and substance of thinking going back centuries and the repetition of traditional views down to minutiae, as if there is no new set of problems deserving careful attention. This sincere loyalty to traditional faith, well-intended *conservatism*, could, however, become an inhibiting factor in contemporary theology striving to be relevant.
- Innocent conservatism could, and does, at times, deteriorate into an aggressive, reactionary, religio-ideological rejection of science, becoming a *literalistic, fundamentalist entrenchment of the past* (rather, a specific past) and its reactionary interpretation of the basic Christian scriptures and the Christian faith.
- In an *uncritical conformism* to whatever science, extended in a high level of technology, may say or do, science becomes a functional equivalent of theology and, ignoring or denying the risk factors inherent in an absolutised science itself, is presented as a world-saving enterprise. The present ecological crisis is, at least to some extent, the result of a science-based technology unchecked by the reins of constant scrutiny, including theological participation in the public sphere.
- *Reactionary rejection*, sometimes festering for years, is bursting out from variants of Christianity – a rejection of Christianity in its entirety, of theology as such, of belief in 'God' as an ontological factor in any sense. Stooping to a rhetoric of resentment and enmity, theism and theology in whatever sense is here decried as backward ignorance.

All four strategies are at fault, and the present era poses a challenge, extends an invitation, to explore a new landscape, lay out a new garden of religious thought. Johan Buitendag is a pioneer in this task for the future. It would be a kind of theology with:

- A well-developed historical sense, an explanation of religion of a bygone historical epoch, in which historically normative faith, action and thought were formed.

Note: Special Collection: Johan Buitendag Festschrift, sub-edited by Andries van Aarde (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

- A sympathetic understanding, benevolent interpretation, of past intentions and actions of well-intending actors in their distant situation, learning from and continuing the best concerning 'God' and 'creation' from that historical context.
- The creative ability to forge new thinking as may be appropriate in novel sets of complex circumstances.
- A seeking and establishing of fruitful collaboration with the natural sciences of today.
- A deep concern about the destruction of nature and the threat to all earthly life largely because of human ignorance and greed, of which science is an unintentional tool and present-day mass media a seemingly irresistible propaganda machine for fostering more need.
- A profound awareness of the need for humanity to promote a sense of cosmic belonging, involving a high degree of responsibility and love for all life.
- An experience of nature and thinking about it as permeated by an unspeakable mystery.
- A mystery to be respected in the tone and content of 'God-talk', and which, I may add, ends in mystical silence.

Johan Buitendag admirably manages to combine the aforementioned in his career as scholar and professor of Christian systematic theology. Apart from his own academic output with its high degree of originality and integrity, he is a highly respected figure in international scholarship and ecumenical circles. He was mentor and supervisor for a large number of post-graduate students, with a significant proportion from other African countries. He is a builder of bridges between different communities and different intellectual programmes.

As said, at the centre of Buitendag's theological enterprise is the eco-theological concern: God thought of as essentially in relationship with his creation. This presupposes and fosters a programme of collaboration, mutual resonance, between theology and science, no longer dealing with two fields of interest imagined to be very discrete, but sharing the coincidence of a common problem: The mystery of Being. In Buitendag's thinking, the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity receives a new and marked emphasis. And (closely related to the thinking of Jürgen Moltmann) 'God' means 'God-and-Cosmos', intended as 'God-in-Cosmos' [immanence], critically exploring the possibility of 'Cosmos-in-God' [panentheism]. Taking into account the real and possible shades of emphasis in the notion of panentheism, the one characteristic shared by all proponents, is the retention of the word and concept of 'God' as referring to an ontological reality whose existence is accepted, however closely related to cosmos, also distinct from cosmos. Avoiding a position of pantheism, which would collapse the difference between God and Cosmos, and without denying the classical orthodox Trinitarian dogmas of Christianity, Buitendag seeks to place emphasis not only on the interaction between God

and Cosmos, but stronger, on the mutual immanence, inherence of God in his creation and creation in its Creator.

At the level of human understanding, 'theology' and 'science' should meet, engage, and interact with the inviting possibility of sharing, mutual overlap, and even of coinciding. In the programmatic terms of Buitendag's terminology, such a 'cosmotheandric', 'ecodomic', 'sophiological' programme, combining God, humans and Cosmos in one integrated field of research and discourse, is without doubt highly beneficial to theology, stimulating renewed consideration and communication of the essential Christian message and beneficial to the development of science and the future of the planet.

The dimension of *ecclesiastical leadership* should be added to Professor Buitendag's highly significant systematic theological contribution at a time of difficult adaptation to a new political dispensation in South Africa after decades of apartheid, in an even wider historical context of tragic struggle for meaningful survival over centuries. In this respect his role as a member of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa offers testimony of his sense of balance between loyalty to sound tradition that has carried its adherents through difficult circumstances over centuries, and the need for change not only socially, between human groups, but also theologically, including ecodomically. Indeed his ecodomic concern implies a social and ecumenical concern for the quality of human co-existence on a shared and threatened earth. Throughout the church's internal struggle during the apartheid years a young Buitendag, later moderator of that Church (2004–2007), sought depth and balance of judgement, realising that the apartheid episode was to be understood and judged in terms of the essence of the message of Jesus of Nazareth concerning unconditional love, integrated with a wide peripheral historical vision, the epochal conditions of the times and foresight into a future unfolding from present theological thought, followed by words, policies and actions.

From 2010 to 2018, Johan Buitendag also served as *leader at tertiary academic institutional level, in the capacity of Dean of the Faculty of Theology* at the University of Pretoria, with an exceptional vision of a creative arrangement of theological and wider religious tertiary study in a future South Africa and elsewhere. Of special significance was, and remains, his recognition of a horizon transcending the limits of any one particular Christian denomination and, for that matter, of any one particular religion. Indeed, all religions inhabit the same Cosmos, share the same earth and the same course of human evolution and history, sprout from the same human sub-consciousness. Christian theology is a great manifestation of religion as a homoversal phenomenon, expressing the most profound depth of the human mind, and Professor Buitendag is a truly ecumenical spirit, as his recognition of the need for and his active involvement in opening the gates of a previously closed Christian faculty of theology demonstrate. A faculty of theology, reflecting the essence of true religious thought, should not be a ghetto,

but a space for open critical discussion among all churches and religions and with all the disciplines of the human mind, including the natural sciences with a view to develop a space where life and nature can be truly appreciated as a gift.

The possibility of an inclusive theology, replacing an exclusive model, engaging with all religions and all scientific disciplines in the service of all of humanity in the demanding present context is a major achievement of Professor Buitendag. Admittedly on the fringe of present realisation on a large scale, it should under no circumstances be excluded from a future scenario. In Buitendag's vision, it would demand vigorously critical testing of all truth claims, allow the laying of diverse accents, including the preference for a particular theological or religious tradition. Buitendag indeed demonstrated such a course in his own sympathetic engagement with Russian sophiological thought, in which Sophia plays a central role, as a result of which the delicate doctrine of the Holy Spirit receives fresh attention. This engagement of his is an application of a strategy of religious multilogue in a shared common public sphere, for the

shared common human good, in the shared common Cosmos.

Adding up the threesome of academic achievement, ecclesiastical leadership and academic management, the stature of a remarkable figure emerges: Rooted in the past but not captive or victim of the past; informed by a profound knowledge and understanding of the present and inspired by a sense of responsibility for an emerging future with threats to all life on earth; promoting the cause of progressive Christianity in the wider context of 're-ligion' (taken, quite literally, as 'bonding with the ultimate natural conditions') as a common human passion. Buitendag starting his eighth decade and as vigorous as before, demands attention, invites us to join him on the quest for new wine in fresh wineskins.

Professor Buitendag, a remarkable Christian theologian, mentor, human being, child of nature, we thank you sincerely and, from all who contribute to this volume and all your friends and colleagues outside. Our wish to you is that you may flourish in time to come and continue to provide outstanding academic, institutional, and spiritual leadership.