

Edwin Arthur Burtt

October 11, 1892 — September 6, 1989

Ned Burtt was born in Groton, Massachusetts, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He remembered his mother as a gentle and devout woman who taught him that the best form of religious faith is indispensable to the successful living of a life. His father he remembered in part as a zealot who early in his adult career determined, in order to demonstrate his faith in divine providence, to forswear dependence on a salaried income and allow God to provide for the material needs of his family as He saw fit. In the service of this ideal, Ned's father went to South China at the age of 45, to spend the rest of his life as a missionary for evangelical Christianity. One result of these decisions was that Ned spent several of his teenage years in China. Another that he acknowledged is that his own philosophical thought, although always deeply sympathetic to religious perspectives on the world, was marked from the beginning by a reaction against what he saw as the narrowness of his father's outlook.

Returning from China, Ned went from Mount Hermon School to Yale, where he majored in philosophy, and then to Columbia, where he earned his Ph.D. degree, and then to Union Theological Seminary, where he was awarded the S.T.M. degree. He first established his academic reputation with *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, published in 1924; the revised second edition, from 1932, is still in print and is still highly regarded. The book is a learned and fascinating account of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a critical survey of the thought of a number of seventeenth-century thinkers on the question of how human consciousness, purpose and religious aspirations fit (or do not fit) into the world that that revolution progressively revealed. It owes its eminence partly to the author's perspective on this question, as pressing in 1990 as it was in 1690 or in 1924, and partly to its convincing demonstration that one cannot read intelligently those seventeenth-century thinkers (such as Descartes, Hobbes and Locke) classified in retrospect as major philosophers, without also reading the works of their contemporaries (such as Galileo, Gilbert, Boyle and Newton), now regarded primarily as scientists. This latter moral is one with which most contemporary historians of philosophy would emphatically agree.

Ned taught for two years at Columbia and nine at Chicago before joining Cornell's Sage School of Philosophy in 1932. He was asked on arrival to take on a course on the history and comparison of religions, a new field for him. He willingly complied, and soon made both the course and the field his own. The course, which had 12 students when he first taught it, regularly drew 300 by the time of his retirement in 1960. His writings during this time

included *Types of Religious Philosophy* (1939; rev. 1951) and *Man Seeks the Divine: a Study in the History and Comparison of Religions* (1957), as well as his edition of *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (1955). Work in this area changed his own life. He felt that as the teacher of such a course he owed it to his students to take them as best he could inside the perspective of each of the faiths studied; and the result of this exercise, he found, was to broaden his own outlook, both by highlighting the basic convictions that the major religions share and by encouraging a sympathetic appreciation of what was distinctive about each. It was in this spirit that he joined the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and then, while in India in 1947, also took the vows of a Buddhist layman. His point, he explained, was to emphasize that his spiritual nourishment came from the East as well as the West. When he returned to India in 1953, he and his wife lived in a Hindu religious retreat. In 1966, just two westerners were invited to join in retracing the Buddha's footsteps in honor of the 2500th anniversary of his enlightenment; Ned Burtt was one of them.

Ned also accumulated numerous academic honors during his career. In 1941 he was named Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy. He was elected vice president of the Eastern (and largest) Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1952, and president in 1964. He also served as president of the American Theological Society. He was awarded an L.H.D. by the University of Chicago and the Nicholas Murray Butler Silver Medal by Columbia University; and he was welcomed as a visiting professor at Harvard, Stanford and the University of Hawaii.

Ned was married twice, first to Mildred Camp in 1916, and then to Dr. Marjorie Murray in 1951. He and his first wife had four daughters, of whom two, Virginia and Winifred, survive. But, because of the passage of time if for no other reason, it is the second marriage that is remembered best by most of the friends who survive him in Ithaca. Marjorie Murray Burtt had a distinguished career of her own. After graduating from Columbia Medical School with only the second class that included women, she worked for years as a pediatrician. Increasing interest in the emotional problems of children drew her toward psychoanalytic thought. Encouraged by her acquaintance with Anna Freud, she underwent analysis herself, trained as an analyst, and after her marriage to Ned practiced in Ithaca for 30 years (with adult patients as well as children), until well past her 90th birthday. Ned shared her interest, having undergone psychoanalysis himself in the 1940s. He found that it not only helped to resolve his personal conflicts but gave him new insight into the unconscious influences on his philosophical thought, thereby freeing him to pursue new directions. In her later years Marjorie regularly hosted an informal gathering of local

psychiatrists in their home on Willard Way. Ned often sat in on the discussions, and was respected for his own thoughtful contributions from his philosophical perspective.

This was far from being the only gathering to which Ned and Marjorie opened their home. Wednesday evenings were for Friends, and for any others who wished to gather for meditation and discussion. Most afternoons students and others could come for tea and, depending on the season, enjoy either croquet or the comfort of a warm fire. (Well into his 90s, Ned insisted on bringing the firewood up from the basement himself.) At the Burtts's any students found a home away from home. All remember the warm presence of both of the Burtts and their remarkable ability to see good in people, even while maintaining a realistic awareness of the less attractive sides of human nature. Ned was rarely content to confine these meetings to small talk, and was eager to discuss with anyone the most important topics on which they held views; he drew people into such discussions easily, partly through his quiet humor, partly through his obvious interest in, and openness to, any opinions seriously held, whether or not they agreed with his own.

Ned's writing did not end with his retirement and appointment as Sage Professor Emeritus, but its direction changed. He saw himself now as less of a scholar and more of a seeker, and so gave away most of his professional library. He continued his busy correspondence with friends and acquaintances around the world: he had spoken with Gandhi in the year before the latter's death, and maintained a life-long friendship with Archibald McLeish, a Yale classmate, among others. He described *In Search of Philosophic Understanding* (1965) as "a foil against which readers can test their own evolving philosophy," and addressed his reader personally: "I put into your hands a book which has been in the making a long time; and I hope you may find it a worthy companion in your search for philosophic understanding." He completed another book, *The Human Journey*, when he was 90, basing it on the Stephanos Nirmalendu Ghosh Lectures he gave at the University of Calcutta. It was two years later that he published his final book, *Light, Love and Life*.

His own attitude toward life, and the warm affection of many friends, seemed to make the afflictions of old age more bearable to Ned than they are to many. He refused to let his loss of hearing bar him from discussion, and so often carried a child's "Magic Slate" on which others could write their questions and comments to him. Nor did he allow his increasing frailty to keep him from making at least one trip across the country, entirely by himself, while he was in his 90s. Marjorie's death in 1982 was a severe loss, but he mourned her partly by drawing strength from his friends, inviting any who wished to do so to join him for meditation in his home at eight every morning, the hour at which he found he missed her most. He continued until his final year to spend part of every day working

in his study. He died at home, in the company of friends and of his two daughters, just over a month short of his 97th birthday.

In the Foreword to his final book, Ned Burtt lamented discovering, in his 80s, that he had still not learned how to live. Most of his friends, while accepting his implication that learning must continue while life does, found that assessment too modest.

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