

OLIVER R. BARCLAY

Obituary: Professor Reijer Hooykaas

With the death of Professor Hooykaas in January 1994 at the age of 87 we have lost a foundational thinker on science and faith issues for our generation. His career started as a Chemistry teacher with a degree from the University of Utrecht. After the war he was Professor of the History of Science at the Free University of Amsterdam from 1945–66 combining it with a Professorship in Mineralogy from 1948–1960. He moved to the Chair of History of Science at Utrecht 1967–76. He was (half-time) Visiting Professor at the British Open University 1973–4. His first substantial publication in the History of Science field was in 1933 (*The Concept of Element*) and on Science and Faith in 1943 (*Robert Boyle: A Study in Science and Christianity*). He regarded his 1959 book: ‘*The Principle of Uniformity in Geology, Biology and Theology*’¹ as one of his best. This established his position in the History of Geology field. He was first Vice-President for Europe and then from 1976 to 1984 President of the International Committee on the History of Geological Sciences, contributing regularly to their conferences.²

He visited Portugal several times and had an honorary degree from Coimbra University as well as official honours from Portugal, Poland and Belgium. In the Netherlands he had various honours including Membership of the Netherlands Academy of Science and Letters (the nearest equivalent to an FRS).

A collection of his best papers in a mixture of French, German and English was published by the University of Coimbra, Portugal.³ He was fluent in five languages and able to cope in others. He was one of the few who was *persona grata* in the former Soviet bloc as well as receiving honours from both Catholic and Protestant Universities. While lecturing in communist countries on strictly technical subjects such as crystallography he was approached secretly afterwards by Soviet scientists who said that they guessed that he must be a Christian as they were. This he regarded as a great compliment, because he always believed that, without having to mention one’s personal beliefs, Christian faith coloured the way in which one faced the natural world, and that this was very important. Even though it did not alter the facts it altered the approach and gave that spirit of humble openness to truth that good science needs. He exemplified this and

1 Brill, Leiden 1963. An earlier edition (1959) had the title and sub-title reversed giving a misleading main title: *Natural Law and Divine Miracle*. This was followed by his ‘*Catastrophism, its scientific character in relation to actualism and uniformitarianism*’. North-Holland Publishing Co. Amsterdam 1970 (see 4. below).

2 His paper described as ‘memorable’: *Pitfalls in the Historiography of Geological Sciences* was given at the 1980 meeting when he was 73. Published in: *Histoire et Nature*, Nos 19/20 1983 pp. 21–34.

3 *Selected Studies in the History of Science*. Coimbra University 1983. It included the *Concept of Element* and the *Catastrophism* papers mentioned above.

was full of wonder before the creation, hating scientific, as well as any other, conceit.

One of his academic successes was his identification and publication of a missing treatise by G. J. Rheticus (1514–76), a disciple and assistant of Copernicus. He recognised a quotation, which was all that was then known, in an unnamed leaflet bound up with some 17th century texts.⁴

He was introduced to Britain in 1947 by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who had met him at a continental conference. He was best known in Britain through his repeated visits to speak at the conferences of Christians in Science, which was then known as 'The Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship (RSCF) and through his time at the Open University for whom he led seminars in a number of major cities.

He quickly became a very important influence on the thinking of the RSCF/CiS. He readily made warm friendships, especially with the late Professor Donald Mackay and his family. He was great fun to have as a guest in any home where there were children, telling them stories and following their future with real interest. Though he was primarily a Christian scholar he was also a man of rich faith and humanity.

Characteristically, during his visits to Portugal he took an interest in the very poor Protestant farmers, commenting that it was a strange kind of Christianity that did not concern itself with the poor. So he started and raised funds for a co-operative to facilitate the purchase of seed and other necessities. One vivid picture of him is when he visited a Dutch farmer shortly after the Germans had retreated taking all the livestock and everything else of value with them. He related how he had prayed with the man and read part of Habakkuk 3:

'Though the fig-tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

Two of his early booklets in English were published for the RSCF.⁵ Today he is best known in Britain and in North America by his: *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science*,⁶ which has been frequently reprinted in UK and USA and is still in print after being for a time an Open University textbook.

4 Published as G. J. Rheticus': *Treatise on Holy Scripture and the Motion of the Earth*. North-Holland Publishing Co Amsterdam and New York 1984. Like Ref. 1 above it is a publication of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

5 *Philosophia Libera: Christian Faith and the Freedom of Science*. 1957 and *The Christian Approach in Teaching Science*. 1960. Both Tyndale Press, London. See also this issue of *Science & Christian Belief* for a reprint of the latter.

6 Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh and London 1972.

His 1975–7 Gifford Lectures are in preparation for publication (Fact, Faith and Fiction in the development of Science).

He wanted always to be biblical, but he hated over-confidence and was very suspicious of over-systematisation. He therefore sometimes puzzled his more conservative colleagues by his desire to be free of mere tradition and to be willing to be surprised by the truth. He also loved, in a mischievous rather than a belligerent way, to prick any bubbles of pomposity and human pride, including theological pride. That did not endear him to everyone! He never identified with the Christian philosophy of his colleagues Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven at the Free University of Amsterdam. He believed that they were raising expectations about Christian scholarship, in the sciences in particular, that they could not fulfill, and devaluing God's Common Grace to unbelievers that enables them to discover truth. He nevertheless respected that school for their desire to be biblical. He described himself as an old-fashioned Calvinist and could not accept the philosophical moulds into which people tried to squeeze biblical teaching.

What then were his particular emphases that were so important to science and religion discussions?⁷

1. He helped us to fresh confidence in the apologetic task and to get away from a merely defensive discussion of details. All the data, of both science and biblical revelation, are God's data. No ultimate conflict is possible.

2. He emphasised the need to be humble before the data. Scientific discovery and biblical revelation can both refute established rational expectations. We have to 'sit down before the facts like a little child' in both areas. He enjoyed historical examples of how established theories could be wrong. Thus the 'proofs' that people could not live in the heat of the tropics were refuted by uneducated sailors who came back saying 'we have seen with our eyes and handled with our hands' what was theoretically impossible (c.f. 1 John 1 v 1). We must be 'rational but never rationalistic'.

3. As he put it 'We must beware equally of intellectual laziness and of intellectual conceit'. He became concerned that as Christians became more intellectually respectable and more confident of their position in the world of learning they are in danger of a fresh 'idolatry of our minds'. This as he put it is 'really the liberal disease, whether it takes the form of orthodoxy or not'.

4. There is a proper *learned ignorance*. The wise man knows how little he knows. There is also a most dangerous '*ignorant learning*'. He often quoted the saying of Pascal, who was probably his favourite author: 'The heart has its reasons of which the reason knows nothing', noting the

⁷ The quotations below are taken from articles by him that were reprinted from Christian Arena and The Christian Graduate in the symposium by several writers: *Christian Faith and Science*, Ed. O. R. Barclay, published by UCCF Associates for RSCF, 1985.

deliberate double use of the word reason. We can go along with neither rationalism or irrationalism. We must be realistic.

He was at his very best in informal discussion or answering questions after his lectures. It was often hard to stop the flow of these lively exchanges, lighted up by touches of humour and apt historical references, but repeatedly focusing down onto the basic issues. The lasting memory of him must be of him sitting surrounded by a group of students or young lecturers in animated discussion, encouraging, correcting and stimulating with obvious enjoyment of the exchanges and always pushing the need to recognise the limitations of our reason and dependence on the way God has actually been pleased to create things or reveal them in scripture. A rationalistic presumption that we can say how things are by deduction is as fatal in science as it is in theology.

Dr. Oliver Barclay was for many years Secretary of 'Christians in Science' and is one of the founding editors of 'Science and Christian Belief'.

RELIGION AND THE RISE OF MODERN SCIENCE

Prof. Reijer Hooykaas
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