

Remembering Harold Oliver

By

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On the third anniversary of his death in 2011 I offer some reflections on the life and work of Harold Oliver at the School of Theology. As his first doctoral student, I shared many discussions and maintained a personal relationship with him throughout his teaching years and into his retirement. He had great analytic and technical abilities, intellectual brilliance, and a warm accepting personality. I fondly addressed him as Harry.

From 1957 until 1965 he taught New Testament at The Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina. Having grown up in Southern Baptist fundamentalist culture in Alabama, he expressed his analytic ability in New Testament studies, aided by the existentialist hermeneutic of Rudolf Bultmann. His Bultmann phase, which lasted 15 years, enabled him to transcend biblical literalism. In 1965 Harry was dismissed from Southeastern, and the charge was his teaching Bultmann. His dismissal was widely discussed in theological circles across the country.

Harry turned down an offer to teach at the State University of Iowa and accepted an invitation from Dean Walter Muelder to join the School of Theology faculty. He was an excellent teacher, and he believed that New Testament Greek should be taught in relation to modern Greek, so that students could understand the historical continuity of the language.

He was also the principal interpreter and translator of Fritz Buri, the Swiss existentialist theologian. He had studied with Buri in Basel in the academic year 1963–1964. His inaugural lecture at the School of Theology was on Buri's theology, and it generated considerable excitement. While at Boston University, Harry translated four books and four papers of Buri.

When he arrived at the School of Theology, he informed Dean Muelder that he was moving toward philosophical theology. A dramatic turn in his work occurred in the academic year 1971–1972. With the support of a Danforth fellowship he became a Visiting Fellow in the Institute of Theoretical Astronomy at Cambridge University, where he worked with the eminent astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle. Out of that work Harry was admitted into the Royal Astronomical Society.

In Cambridge Harry examined the relationship between physical cosmology and philosophical theology. He realized that a complementarity obtains between subject and object and that reality exists neither in subject nor object but in the relationship between them. Thus, relationships are real, and relatedness characterizes reality in all dimensions.

After Cambridge, Harry reinterpreted the history of Western thought, showing that the subject-object paradigm had grown out of classical Newtonian physics, but that it had collapsed with relativity theory and quantum physics. He studied the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and found that it was based upon projective geometry which posited relations as basic rather than metrics. He contended that process theologians had neglected the mathematics of Whitehead's philosophy and failed to represent it adequately. These ideas appear in his book *A Relational Metaphysic* of 1981 and in his last book *Metaphysics, Theology, Self* of 2006.

Harry formulated relational models of myth, ritual, and the biblical text in a series of papers reprinted in his 1984 *Relatedness*. He theorized the relational self and argued that pure experience is a unitive act preceding reflection which dichotomizes ordinary experience into abstract, derivative polarities. His papers on the relational self were supported by Krister

Stendahl's claim that Western theology, as heavily influenced by Augustine and Martin Luther, was founded on the "introspective conscience" and produced an inclination toward subjectivism.

His critique of the "Western ego" brought him into dialogue with Eastern Orthodoxy. Harry believed that the doctrine of the Trinity in the Eastern Church made relatedness ultimate and that the goal of human destiny is to share by grace what the Trinity possesses. The goal is deification or personal communion with God. Harry explained the theological implications of relational metaphysics in a 1986 lecture before the Faculty of Theology at the University of Athens. Altogether, he made three trips to Greece and translated an important paper on apophatic theology by the Greek scholar Marios Begzos.

At the suggestion of Fritz Buri Harry studied Japanese Buddhism, particularly the work of Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto School, as a means of understanding pure experience. During his last five years in Boston University, he studied Japanese and produced Japanese-style paintings. His translation of Fritz Buri's *The Buddha Christ* was a major contribution to the Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

Toward the end of his teaching career, he gave serious attention to Boston personalism, which he had ignored for 23 years and which I had found to be excessively rationalistic, neurologically obsolete, and paternalistic. At international conferences on the person in England and Poland Harry objected to the idealism of personalism as an abstraction and defended his view of person in terms of Greek patristic theology as relational, mutual, and communal.

Harry's career at the School of Theology involved a remarkable intellectual pilgrimage of which I was an eye witness. He was a pioneer of the current dialogues between science and religion, Eastern and Western Christianity, and Christianity and Buddhism. When I learned of

his death on September 22, 2011, I reread his sermon on “The Death of Death” that he delivered in Marsh Chapel on Good Friday April 8, 1977. He pointed out that for early Christians resurrection meant the death of death or the negation of the negation. He discussed the death of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and formulated a possible eulogy for him: “Now he belongs to the ages. And he does; and because he does, he belongs to us.” Now Harry belongs to the ages, and so he belongs to us.